

BERNICE CRAWFORD

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO
PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

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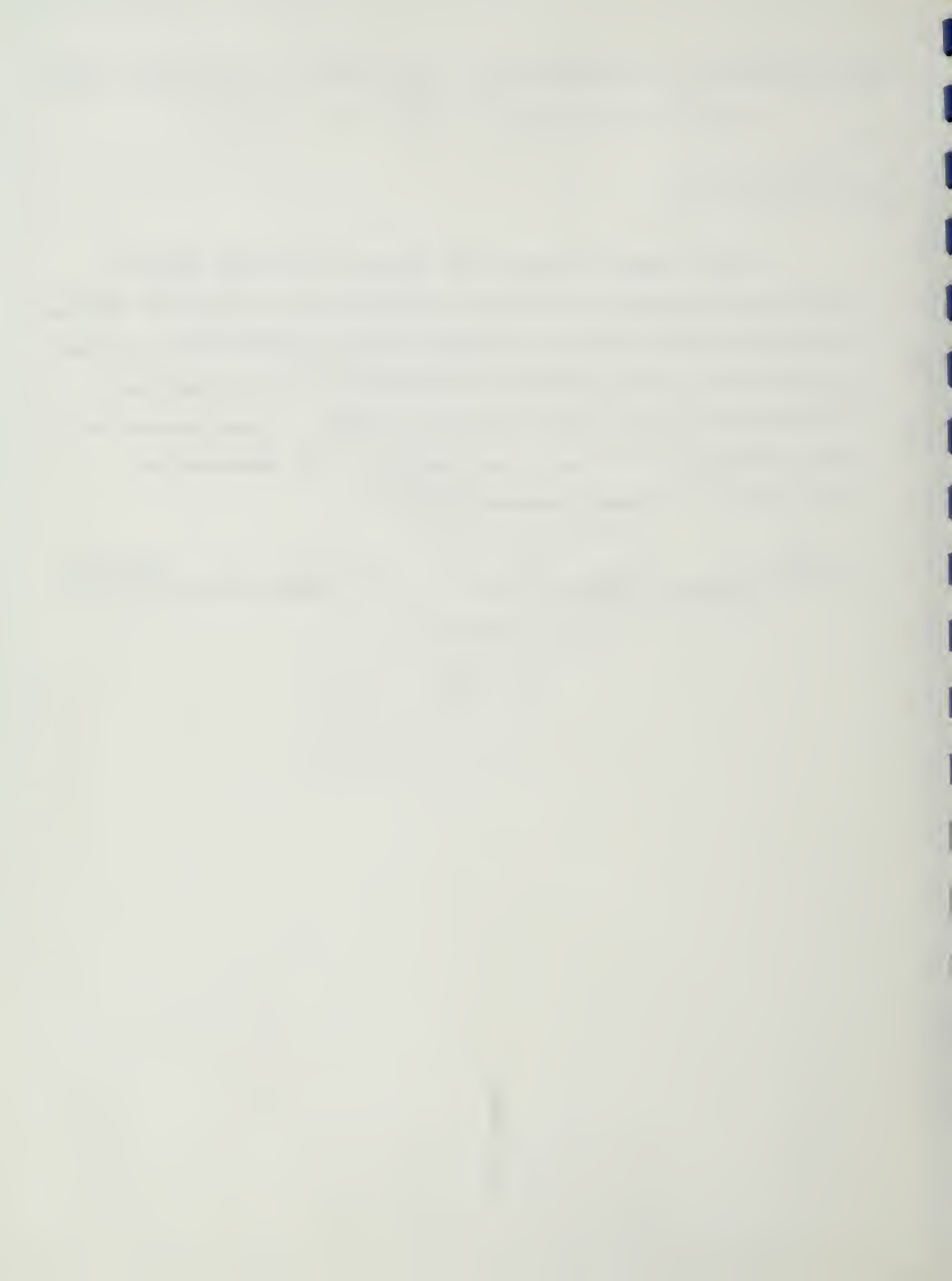
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Bernice Crawford
Bernice Crawford

Date Nov. 7, 1978



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Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

INTERVIEW WITH MRS. BERNICE CLARK CRAWFORD

NOVEMBER 7, 1978

At Mrs. Clark's home at 343 Vernon Street, San Francisco (Ingleside area)

Interviewer: Jesse J. Warr

Transcriber: Mary Wells

JW: Where were you born?

BC: I was born in San Francisco.

JW: When was that?

BC: That was ... do I really have to give the date? It doesn't make any difference. I mean, it does. But is it necessary?

JW: Well, you can give me an approximate date.

BC: Well, if I give you any date, it should be the correct date. So ... well, let's skip that one.

JW: Okay. Was this before the First World War?

BC: That I was born?

JW: Yes.

BC: Yes. Now don't be funny. (Chuckle) I was born in 1909.

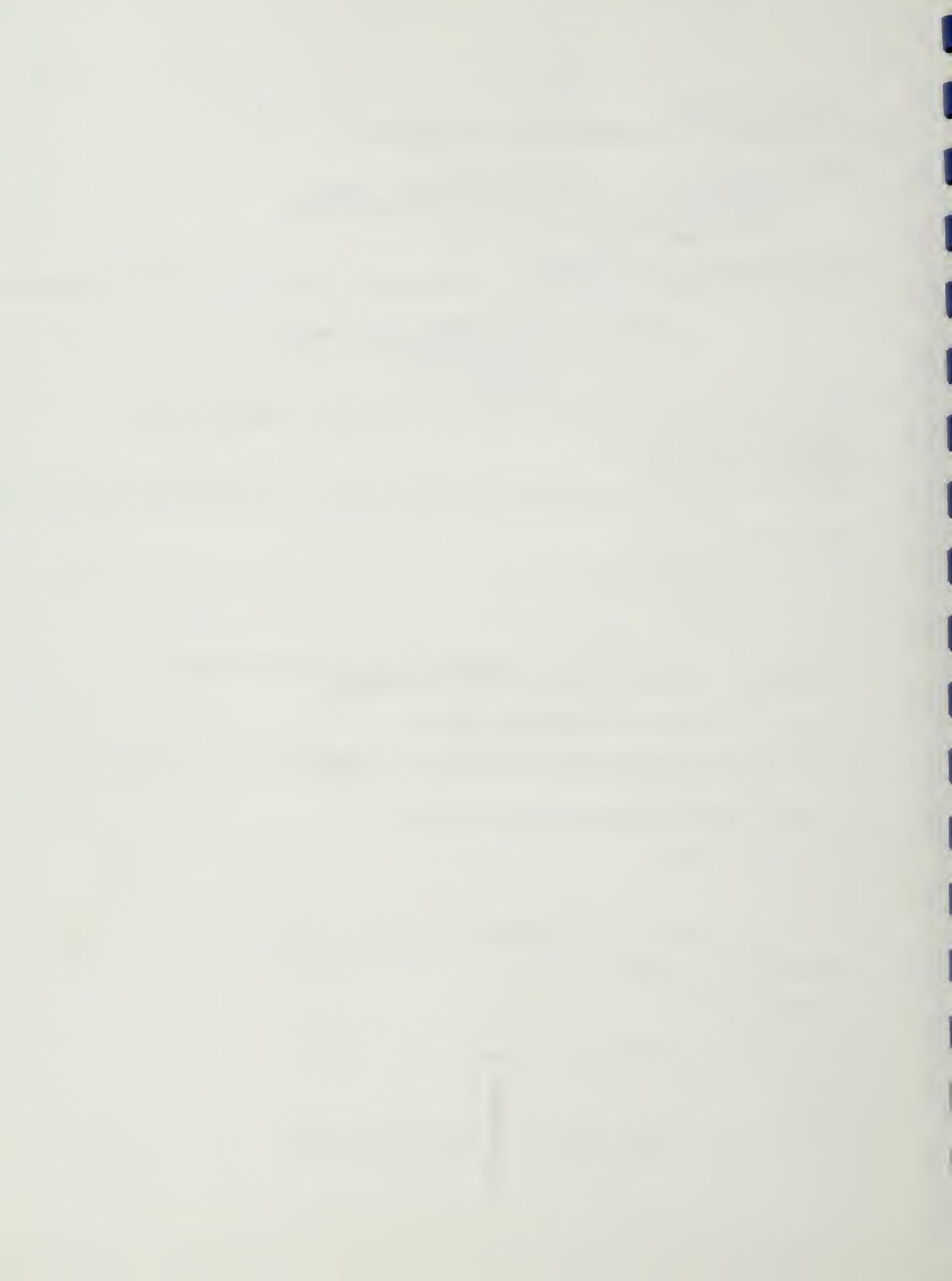
JW: What month was that?

BC: November 17.

JW: Oh, so you have a birthday in a week or so?

BC: Right.

JW: Where was your family living at the time you were born?



BC: At: 129 St. Mary's Avenue. Our house is still there.

JW: Where is St. Mary's Avenue?

BC: It's in the Mission. It's right off San Jose Avenue.

JW: Were you born at home?

BC: Yes. Dr. McGill was the doctor.

JW: And who was he?

BC: He was an Irish doctor.

JW: A friend of the family?

BC: The family doctor, yes.

JW: Was there anything unusual about your birth (or) your appearance, in your early days that your parents told you about?

BC: No. No, not at all.

JW: Were you the first child?

BC: I was the fourth. There were four daughters, and I was the fourth one.

JW: What are their names?

BC: Eva Cowings; Leona Coleman; and Melba Whitaker.

JW: Were all of you born in San Francisco?

BC: Oh, yes ... my mother was born here too.

JW: I know that your family moved when you were very young.

BC: Yes, when I was around ... three-and-a-half. I was a pre-school child around three-and-a-half years old.

JW: So you wouldn't have any remembrances of San Francisco at this time.

BC: There's only one thing I can remember as a little child: the little neighborhood kids would ring my doorbell and say, "Mrs. Clark, can Brownice come out?" Instead of Bernice they'd say Brownice. (laughs) I guess they were so little they couldn't pronounce my name.

JW: When did you move? Oh, you moved when you were three-and-a-half. Where did you go?

BC: To the San Joaquin Valley.



JW: Do you know why the family made this move?

BC: My father became ill with a very bad cold. Not having antibiotics in those days or the drugs that they have nowadays, he could not get rid of it. Evidently, they thought he had consumption. He was from Kingston, Jamaica, where it is warm. So the doctor advised him to move to a warmer climate. This meant leaving the home he had bought at 129 St. Mary's Avenue, where my sister Melba and I were born. He had the front yard dug out, and had it cemented. He put in a flat there, and he rented it out to some of the old-timers like the Sands. Have you ever heard of Dave Sands?

JW: Yes.

BC: He can verify the fact that his father rented from my father. Then there was ... another family that rented from my father: by the name of Francis. There's a LeCount Francis.

JW: Clark.

BC: Oh, is her last name Clark?

JW: Yes.

BC: I wouldn't know her if she walked in this room ... I was just looking at a little old-fashioned picture that was taken before we left San Francisco. We were all on a picnic and she was in the picture ... Well, her (L. F. Clark) family rented from my parents. Then there is another family, the Morrisises ... Vince Morris. His mother lived there ... I don't know if his father lived there.

JW: So you moved to what specific place in the San Joaquin Valley?

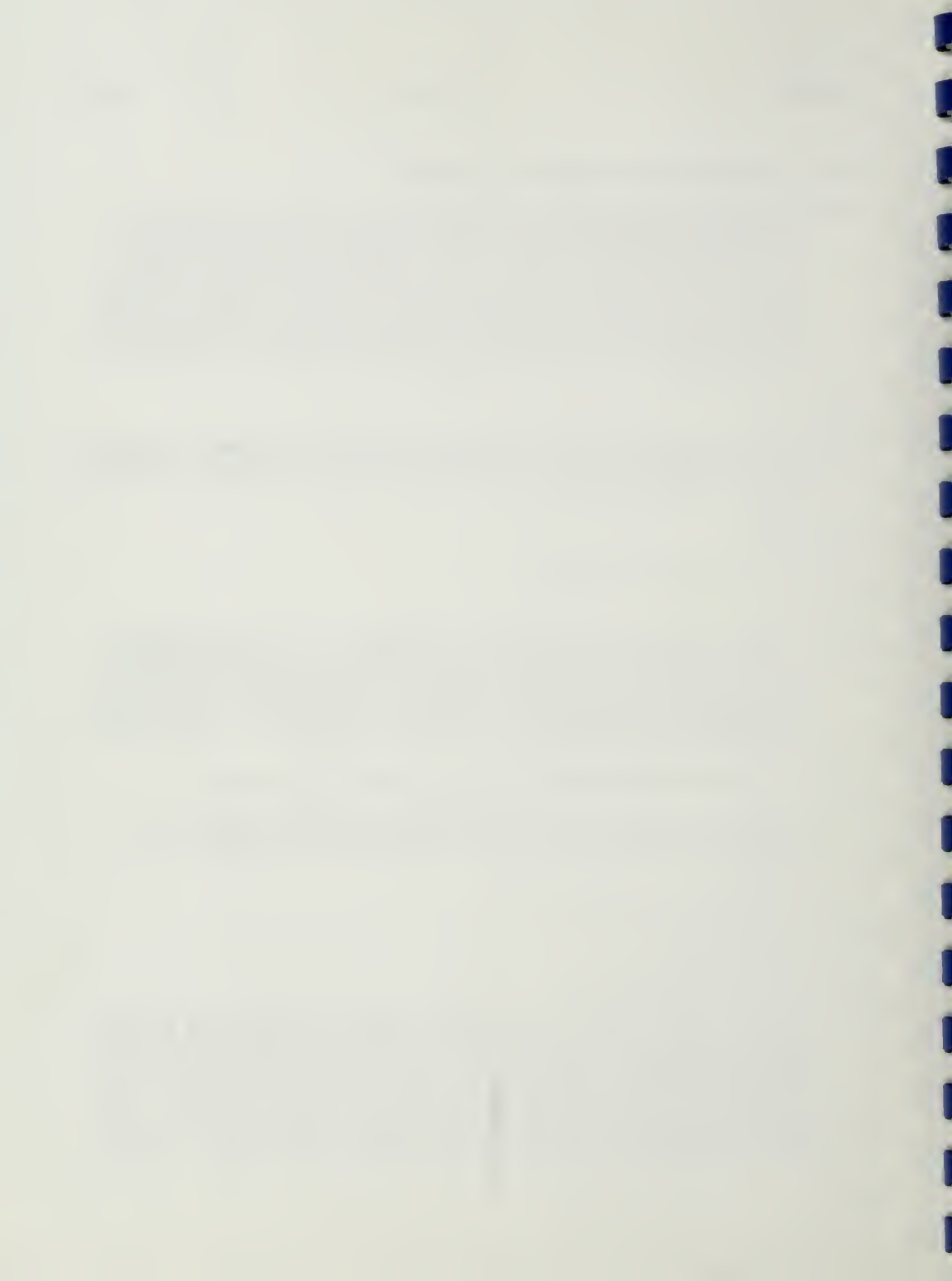
BC: We moved to a little place called Monmouth. My father rented out the home here and bought land and cows, and equipment for a dairy, in Monmouth.

JW: What county is Monmouth in?

BC: Fresno (County).

JW: Why that particular town?

BC: Well, I'll have to tell you, although I always feel that people are bored by these little stories: he left San Francisco on a train. He was heading for Los Angeles. And, you know, in those days there were a lot of Blacks working on the trains. They were one of the main sources of travel at that time. One of the porters on the train talked to my father. He told him he knew an old family in San Francisco that was very nice. My father thought, "Well, if he knew this family in San Francisco, he must be a nice person." He told my father ... his name was Young ... there's



a large family of Youngs in the Valley. He told my father that he had a brother-in-law in Monmouth that had some property that he wanted to sell. I guess he must have talked about the possibilities of how my father could have a dairy, and make a good living from it.

So instead of going to Los Angeles, he got off in Fresno. He bought property from a Mr. Abernathy. My father bought cows for a dairy also. He thought he could raise vegetables to sell, but he didn't know too much about farming to begin with, so it didn't work out too well.

My sister Eva was taking vocal lessons and piano lessons. My sister four years younger than her, Leona, and my sister Melba also took piano lessons because my father and mother thought it quite important that one should know how to play the piano.

My mother was born and raised in San Francisco. And what an adjustment that (living in rural Fresno County) must have been for my mother ... it was what you would say a culturally deprived area. As I grew up, I would hear my sisters complain, about living in the country. It was really like taking my sisters to the woods; everything was cut off. It was a very bad experience for my family. My father lived to be nintey years old, so the climate was good for him (laughs).

JW: How long did you stay in the Valley?

BC: Until 1941. I got married, had two children, and the oldest was about eight or nine when we moved up here in '42.

JW: Oh, so you were down there for a long time?

BC: Yes. I was raised down there. I feel that things would have been different if we had stayed in San Francisco.

JW: What was the house like that you bought, then?

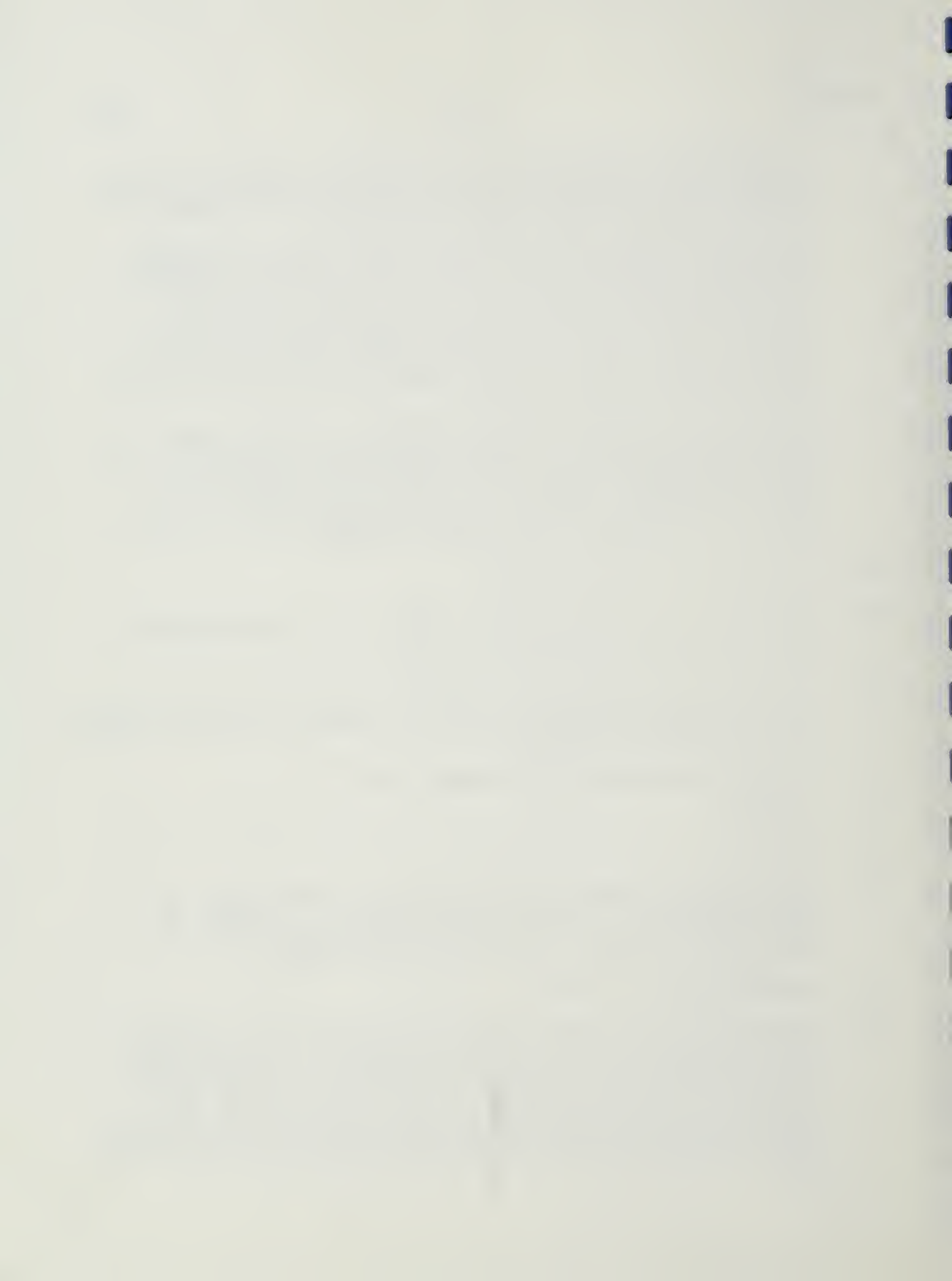
BC: In Fresno?

JW: Yes.

BC: Well, my father went down there and proceeded to build a house. He tried to build it like the homes in San Francisco ... up high. You could walk under it. All of the homes in the country were flat, you know, close to the ground. Then he sent for his family.

JW: How many bedrooms did it have?

BC: It had at least two bedrooms, I think, it seems like to me ... big bedrooms ... he made them so big that we were able to have ... two double beds in one room and they had those big headboards ... I guess you know ... (no, I don't think you know about those.) I wish we had saved those headboards ... big, tall headboards. You know, mahogany. He had all of the furniture shipped from San Francisco by freight. He had our piano shipped. We were the only people in the community to have a piano at that time.



My sister that could sing, she was so unhappy because ... I guess her style was a little different ... I can remember her saying, "Well, you know, Mary So-and-so snubbed me." And I guess it was a matter of not understanding my sisters' ways. I guess that they thought that my sisters were putting on airs or something, I guess ... because maybe they didn't sound exactly the way they (the local people) did. My sisters had it pretty rough.

JW: When did they pick up and leave?

BC: I have one that's still there with the husband she married 60 years ago. Melba came back ... right after she graduated from high school and entered San Mateo Junior College--don't ask me what year.

JW: She was still single at the time?

BC: Oh, yes. Yes. Oh, yes. She came back and stayed with friends of my parents.

JW: In other words, they left as soon as they were able?

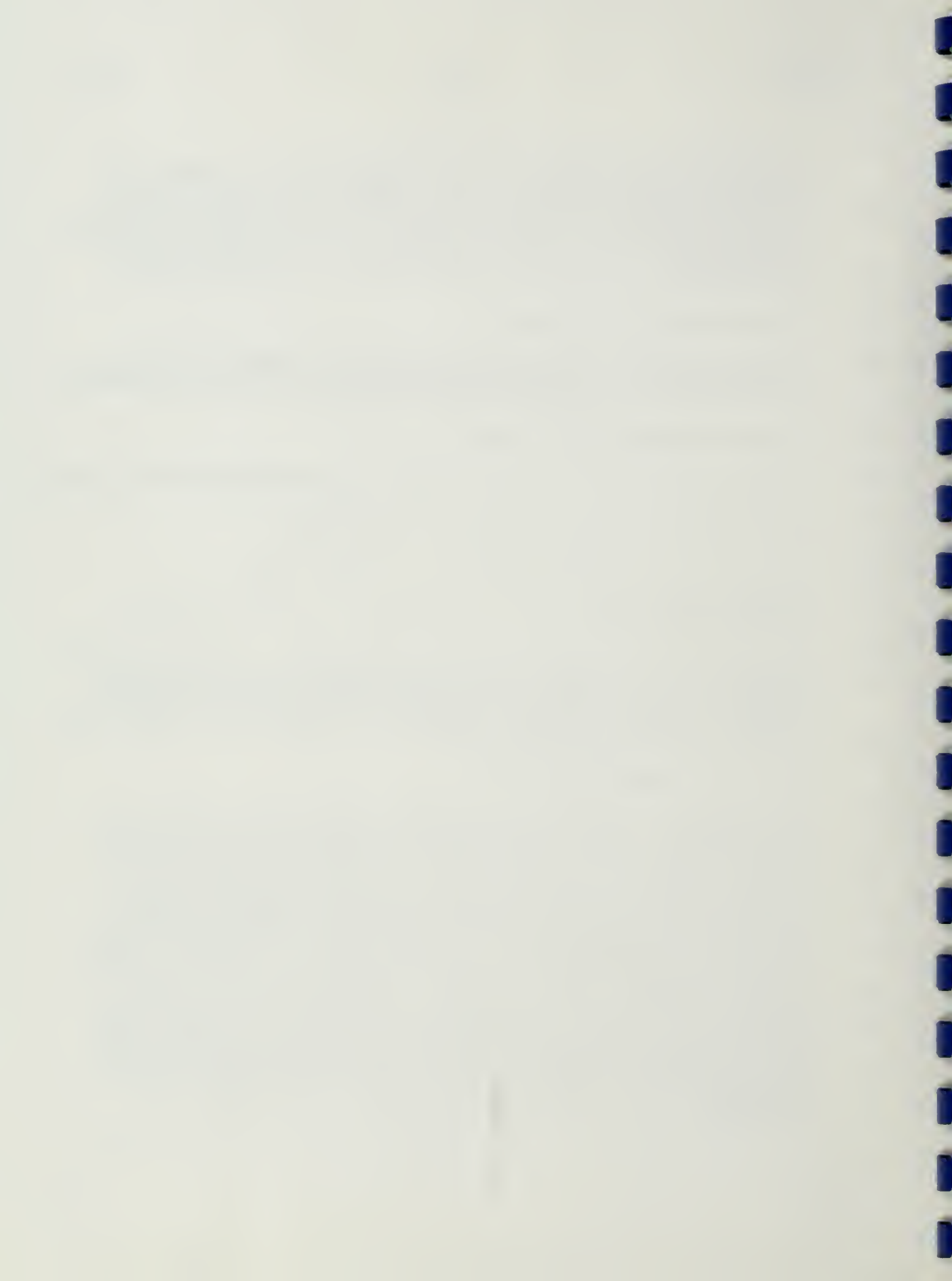
BC: Yes, all except my oldest sister and I. We stayed there.

JW: Did you have a lot of visitors coming around when you were coming up, people coming around?

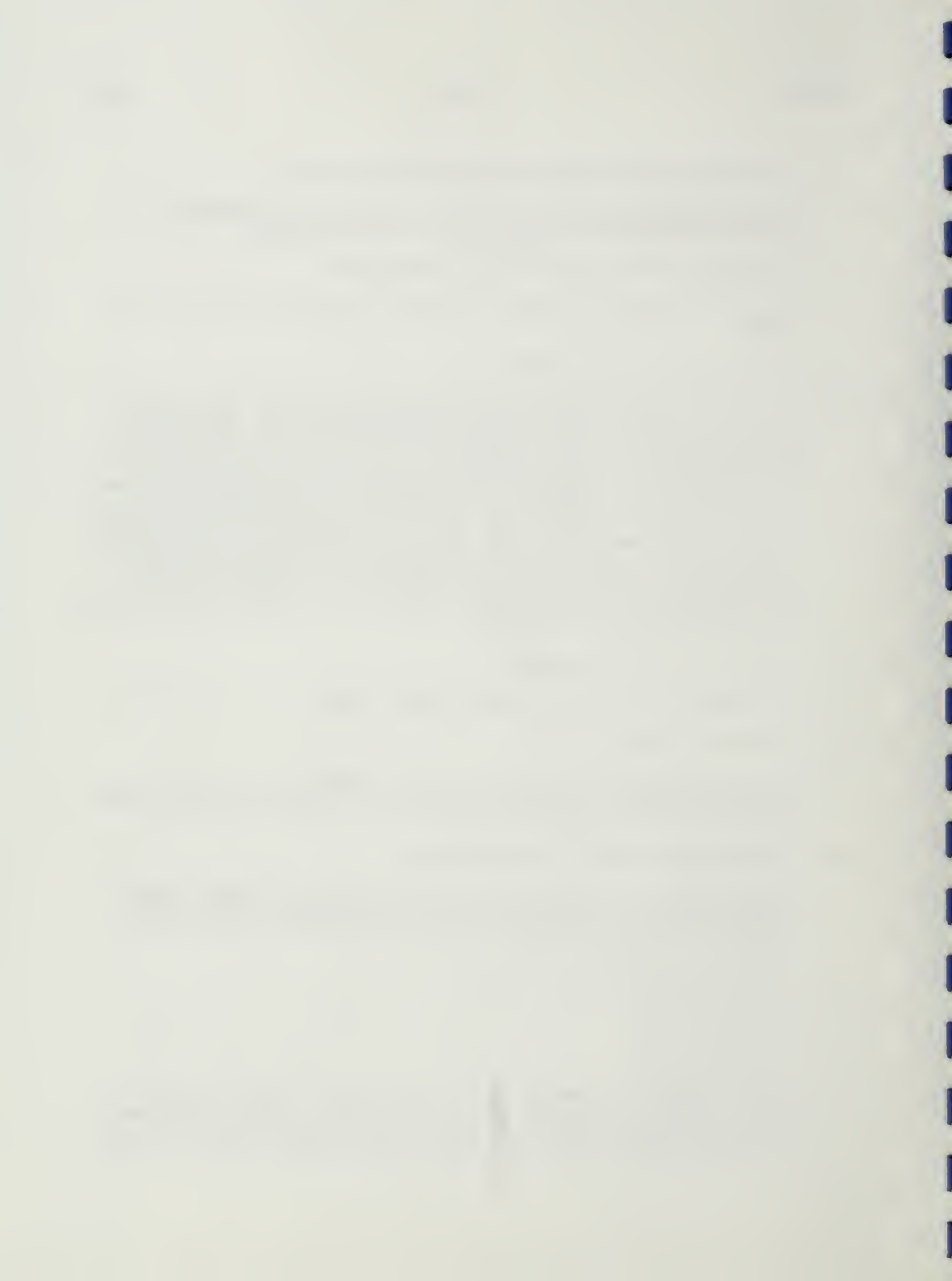
BC: As a little girl? I was a very lonely child because ... I didn't have many playmates as a little girl. When I got old enough to go to the library (maybe around ten or eleven), I'd bring home books, and read the whole weekend ... because there weren't any children around for me to play with, especially where we lived in Carruthers.

JW: There weren't any children around?

BC: Well, they were so far away. They weren't close enough ... well, now, wait a minute. There were some German children that I can remember playing with during the summer months. But they weren't there the whole time we lived in this particular place. Of course, now the dairy was sort of a flop. And my father would get complaints from the people living in the house in San Francisco. He'd have to make a trip up here (to settle the complaints). So he sold the house. He had also bought lots over in the Piedmont area. My oldest sister ... in her last letter to me ... I think I read it to you when you were here ... mentioned about my father buying lots over in Piedmont. He sold the lots and then he bought another farm, not a dairy farm, but a vineyard and peach orchard. And not being a farmer, he didn't recognize that the vines weren't good. He had a lot of bad luck in the Valley. So then the ('29) Crash came, and the farmers were wiped out and had to walk off their farms. And my father had sold his property in San Francisco. Then there was the Depression.



- JW: But you were able to stay on your property down there?
- BC: We ... my father ... Oh, we moved to ... he got a job working at another farm, for about a year, then we moved to Fresno.
- JW: So you had to sell the house that he had built?
- BC: Oh, yes. He sold that place. I was about ten years old then, at that time.
- JW: Did you have to do farm work?
- BC: No ... You started to ask me if I ever milked a cow (chuckle). Well, number one, I was too small when we moved on the dairy. And when we moved to this other farm, my father had one cow. But my oldest sisters said, "Bernice, don't ever learn how to milk a cow." Because they were (had been) so thrilled at the thought that they were going to learn how to milk cows, at least the second oldest. Oh, she just couldn't wait to learn how to milk a cow! (I don't think my oldest sister milked cows. I don't ever remember her milking cows.) But my second oldest ... There were two sisters that were very anxious to learn how to milk cows--my sister next to me and then the next one. By the time we moved away from there, they said, "Bernice, don't ever learn how to milk a cow." So, I never offered to. (Laugh)
- JW: Did you keep chickens, rabbits?
- BC: Oh, my father, yes. Yes, he did. At that time.
- JW: Did you feed them?
- BC: Well, my sister next to me, she ... I can remember she was the one ... when we had rabbits, she was the one that was taking care of them. And neighbors would come and steal them.
- JW: Did you know? Why didn't you stop them?
- BC: Well, we didn't know just who it was. But I can just faintly remember my father saying that somebody had stole some rabbits. But I don't remember the details, to tell the truth.
- JW: Did you have animals just as pets?
- BC: Yes. I had a dog.
- JW: What was its name?
- BC: Prince. That was a tragedy. I mean we don't have a dog today because ... well, my father would get a dog ... I loved dogs. And it seemed like every dog my father would bring home, after it got to be a certain age, it would start eating eggs, you know. Then my father would say, "Well,



Bell"--that was my mother--"we're going to have to get rid of that dog." And then it was a heartbreak for me. I ... so when I think of dogs, it's always a sad tale. Then we had a dog in, I guess, around '43 or '44 in San Francisco. And somebody poisoned it. Do you like dogs?

JW: I used to love them, but ever since I have lived in cities I don't like them anymore.

BC: You don't like them?

JW: Well, people don't train them.

BC: Oh, you mean you don't care ... you don't want the care ... ?

JW: I've always had a dog until I went away to school. And I love dogs. But people here, they treat them like sacred cows. As far as I am concerned, they're still animals.

BC: Oh, you don't have that special feeling.

JW: No, they're not people. They're a different species.

BC: Oh, oh, well, then you wouldn't understand my feelings (laugh). I cried a week when our last dog died. So we don't attempt to have any more dogs.

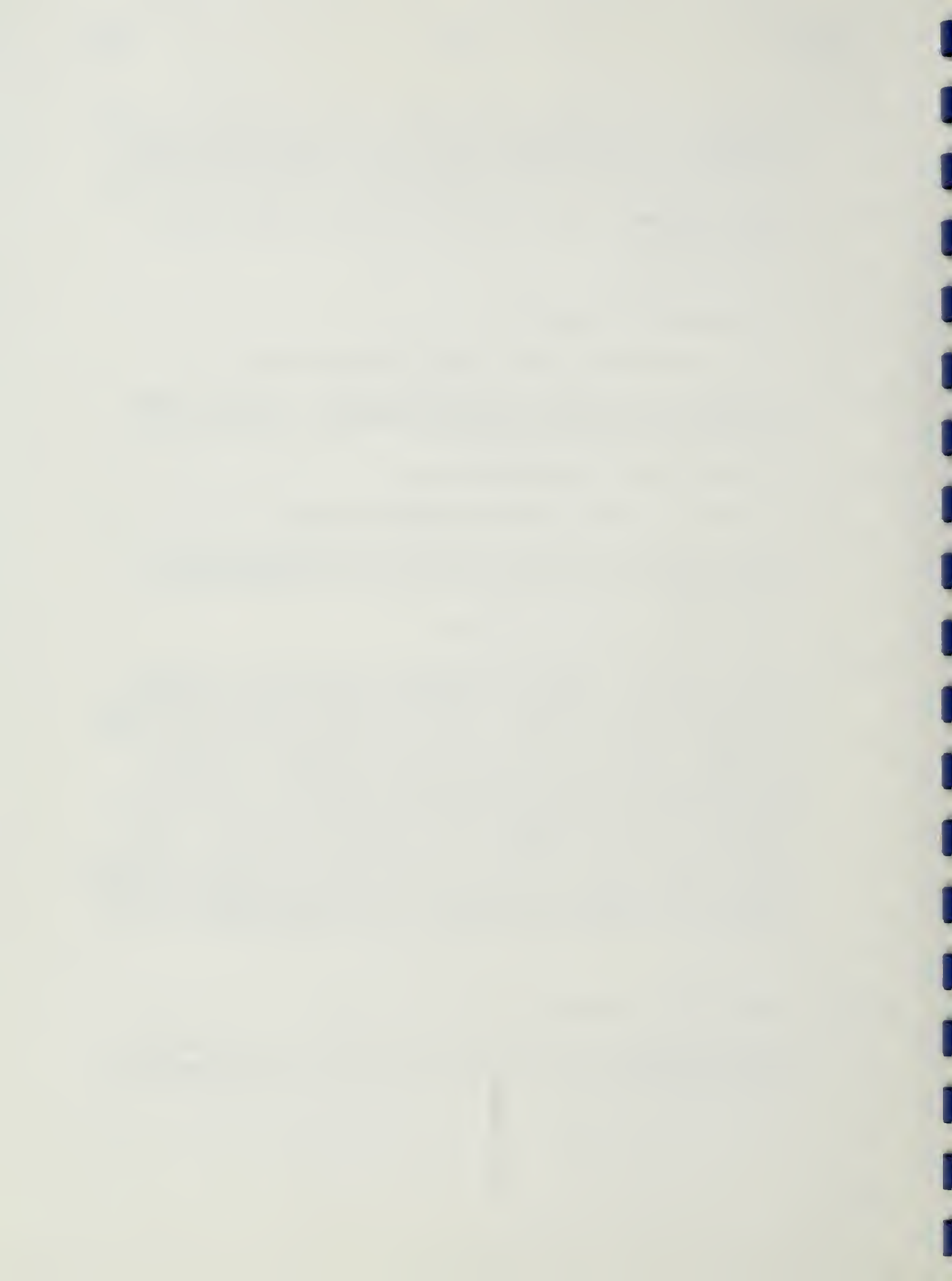
JW: Did you ever get spanked as a child?

BC: Oh, not too much. I guess being the baby of the family ... They (my sisters) said that I didn't get spanked as much as they did because ... But my father would come home ... He would rub his finger on the dining room table to see if there was any dust, and if it was dusty they would get spanked. I didn't experience that sort of thing. By the time I came along, I guess he was a little tired (chuckle), and he didn't bother whether the dining room table was dusted or not. ... He was always at the dinner table watching every move we made. We had to eat "properly." You didn't dare have your elbows on the table. I was a very little girl and I forgot that my father had told me that I had to keep my elbows off the table while I was eating. He walked around and he hit my elbows so hard ... To this day I don't put my elbows on the table (laugh) ... Does this sound strange to you? Because young people have such different ideas of those things. Does it sound silly?

JW: No.

BC: I guess it does sound silly to you.

JW: Well, our parents enforced (sic) in different ways. My father didn't believe in spanking. So he would just tell us ... over and over again until we learned it.



BC: I don't remember getting spankings from my mother.

JW: My mother believed in spanking.

BC: Huh-huh-h-h.

JW: She believed in it very firmly.

BC: Well, my father didn't spank me ... very much.

JW: So what did you do to fill up your time during the day? Chores or what?

BC: You mean like going to ...? ... Well, I had to go to school.

JW: Was that within walking distance?

BC: It was about a mile and a half.

JW: What was school like? Was it a big school? Elementary school.

BC: When I look back, I feel that the teachers were very dedicated ... because, you know, compared to the education that children get nowadays. I think the schools were excellent.

JW: Were there any other Negro children in the schools?

BC: No. I was the only Negro child in grammar school, in Carruthers. In Monmouth, there were a few black children. When I was around eight or nine, my father bought this other ranch and that was over in another area called Carruthers. In Carruthers there was one other black girl about three or four years older than I. And then in Selma High School I was the only black.

JW: When you were in elementary school, did teachers treat you any differently from the other students, since you were from a bigger city and a bigger house and all of this?

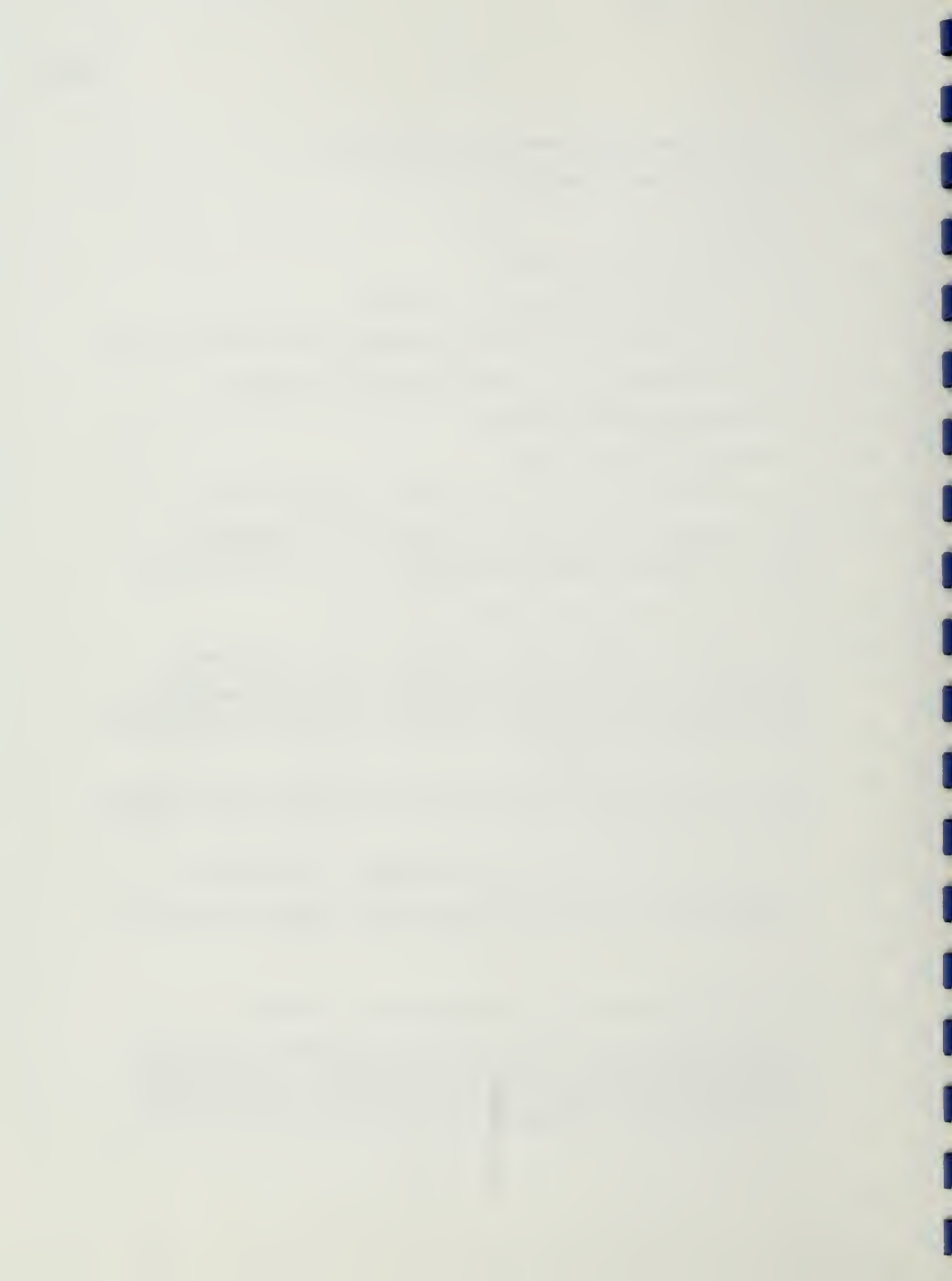
BC: No. I don't think I said our house was bigger. Just different.

JW: I wondered if your teachers or your schoolmates treated you differently than other people, you and your sisters, because you ...

BC: No.

JW: Were you ever singled out for special attention in school?

BC: In school? For special attention? I was treated okay. I had friends in school. Little kids, they aren't too prejudiced. You can always find friends when you are little, don't you think? But after you get to high school, those friends are a little different. But in grammar school you can make it beautifully. Oh, they chum around with you.



JW: Did you do well in school?

BC: Yes.

JW: Did your parents insist that you do? How did your parents enforce or make you do your homework and that kind of thing?

BC: Well, that was just something you had to do. I mean in those days, you were supposed to study. That went along with school. And I was taking piano lessons. My mother didn't have to tell me to practice as a little girl. I'd come home and practice.

JW: Who were your teachers?

BC: That's a good question. That's what my husband asked me not too long ago. He said, "Who was your teacher? Who taught you piano?" I said, "You've never asked." That was just since you've been here. (The last time, about five weeks ago.) I said, "She was a crippled Caucasian. She had to use crutches." She was the one that started me out ...
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BC: ... Professor Green who looked like a German. I took lessons from him in Selma High School.

JW: So you must have been a fairly accomplished pianist ... since you took it all these years.

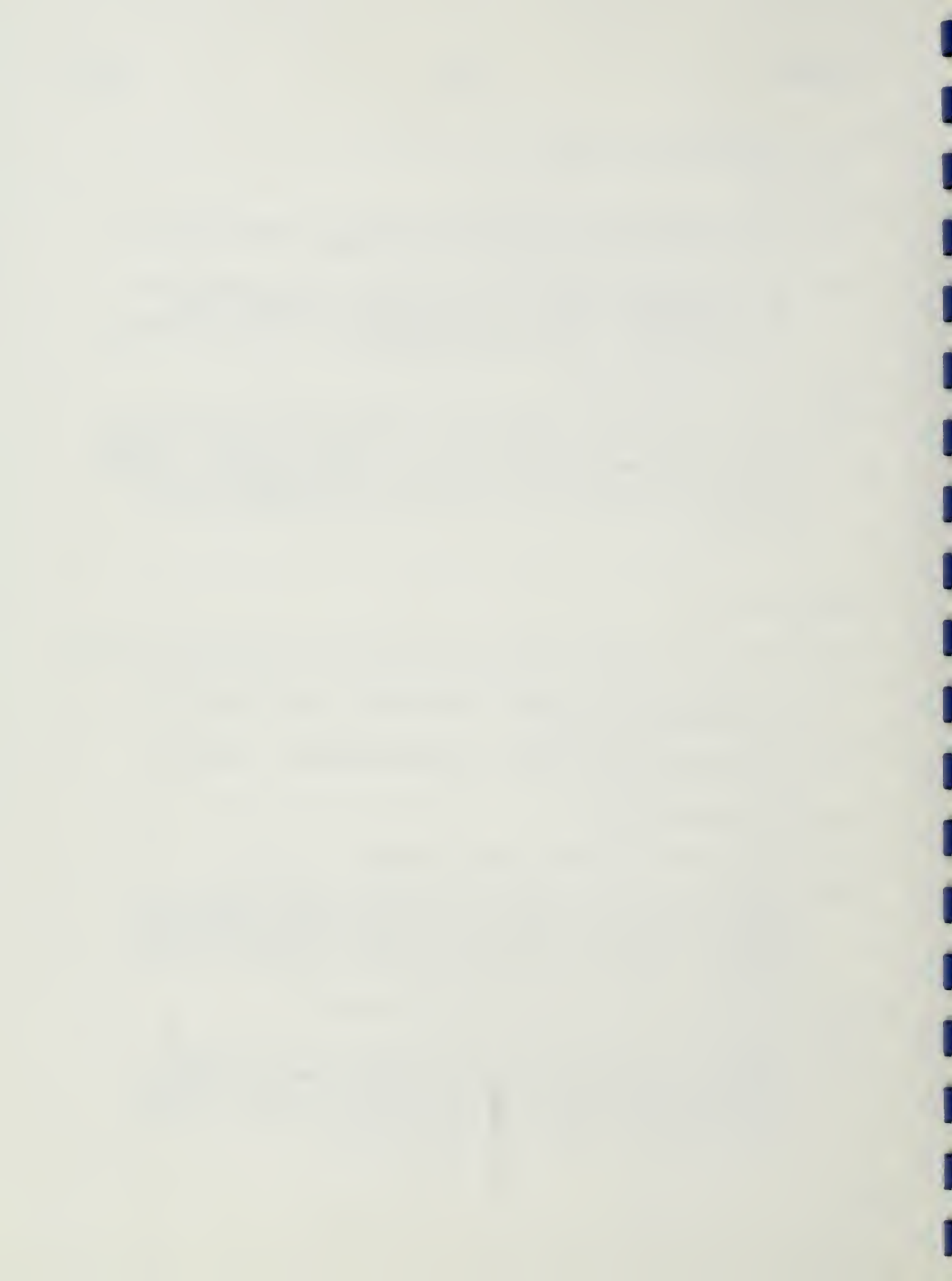
BC: No, I won't say that.

JW: You never gave recitals or things like that?

BC: No. Oh, no, no. No, I can't say I was "accomplished." No, no. I played the piano and I liked it. All of my friends in Fresno were able to ... they knew how to play the piano. As teenagers on Sunday afternoon, we would get together and sit around and play the piano and sing. I mean we'd take turns playing the piano.

JW: Did you play ragtime and jazz, or just classical?

BC: I wasn't one of those that could play jazz. I could only manage classical. I had friends who could get up and play real jazz. I did take a few jazz lessons ... which seems so silly now (laughs). I didn't take jazz lessons very long. But I can remember, I just couldn't stand it, because I couldn't play jazz.



JW: Was this because your parents didn't want you to, or you just couldn't catch on?

BC: No, it just didn't come easy for me to play jazz.

JW: So did you play popular music, sheet music kind of stuff?

BC: Yes.

JW: Did the family get together on Sundays and ...

BC: Yes. My mother played the piano also. She would play sometimes for us to sing.

JW: How did the family celebrate Christmas?

BC: Oh, there was always a family dinner.

JW: Did you have relatives from like San Francisco coming down?

BC: No, I don't have a lot of relatives in San Francisco.

JW: And did your parents have friends around in the community?

BC: Oh, my father was quite a church worker.

JW: Was it an all-black church?

BC: Oh, yes. Yes.

JW: What denomination was it?

BC: It was Methodist.

JW: And this is in Fresno.

BC: Yes.

JW: And what about your mother?

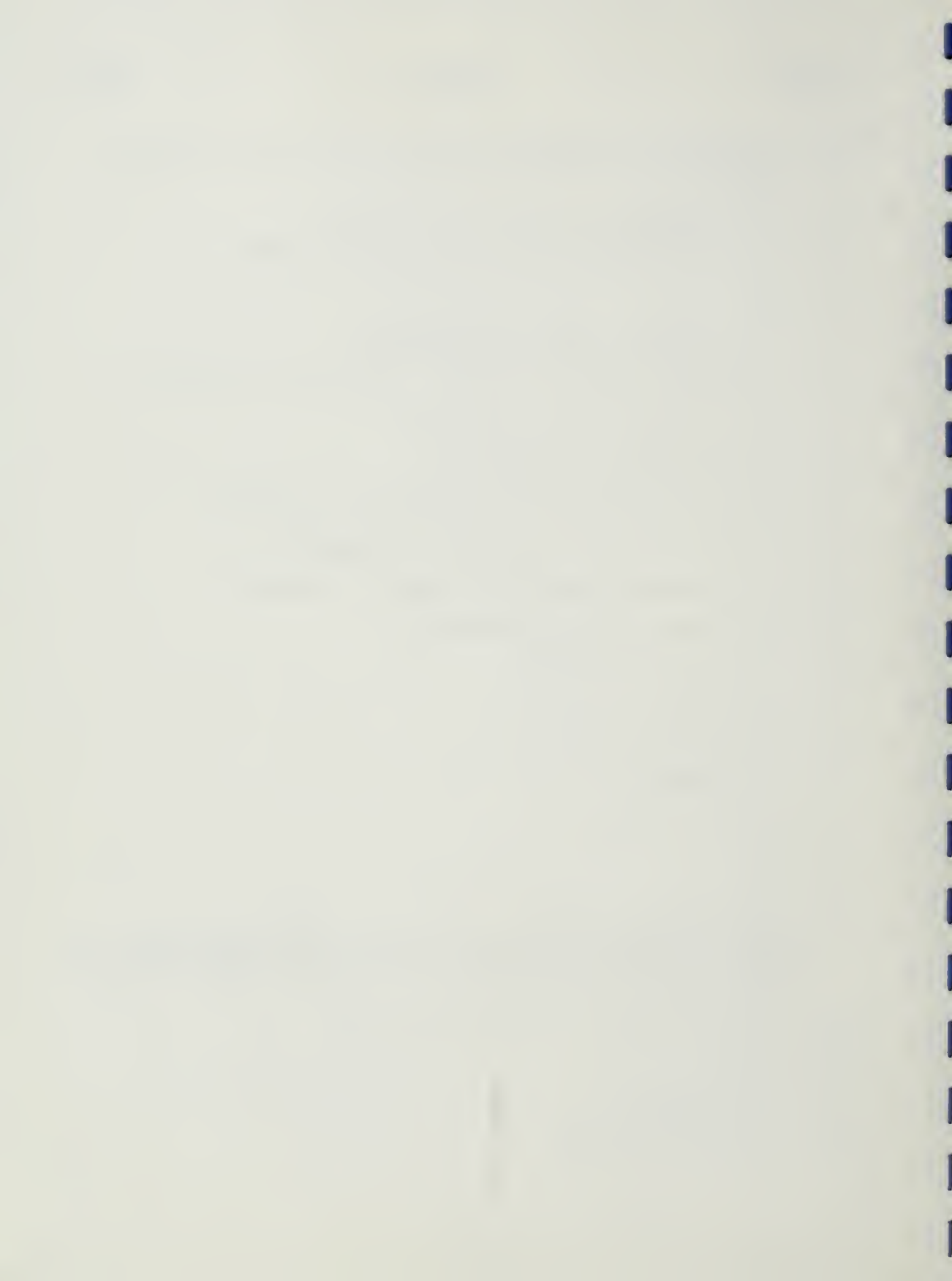
BC: She was a Methodist. My father was more of a church worker than my mother. My father, he, you know, he believed in being right in there, and trying to help raise money and whatnot ... to make the church ... run.

JW: What about birthdays? Were these special days?

BC: Oh, yes.

JW: Did you get gifts?

BC: Oh, yes. Oh, sure, yes.



JW: What were the big days in Fresno for the whole community?

BC: Oh, there was Raisin Day.

JW: Raisin Day! (Laughs) What was that?

BC: That sounds funny to you? Well, you know, in Fresno, that's one of the main products. That's what they raise in Fresno ... raisins, peaches, you know, fruit. In later years they started raising cotton. That was after we moved up here, the farmers started raising cotton. But that's where you find a lot of vineyards, and so ... they had a day they called Raisin Day.

JW: What would happen on that day?

BC: Well, there would be a parade downtown in Fresno. One year there was a black float ... which was something, with all black girls on it-- which was something that hadn't been before. Some organization got it together. Then they'd have dances when I was a teenager on Raisin Day. There are a few people that I know that say they came down from San Francisco on Raisin Day celebrations. But I didn't meet them.

JW: Did you have a nickname as a child?

BC: Yes.

JW: What was it?

BC: Well ... Who ... who made up this form? (Interview guide to which Warr refers, although Crawford cannot read it)

JW: I did.

BC: Oh, did you? Oh, it sounds like you, I swear. (laughs)

JW: That's who it's supposed to sound like.

BC: Great guns! Yes, I had a nickname. My brother-in-law called me "Bunny." Some of my friends called me Bunny.

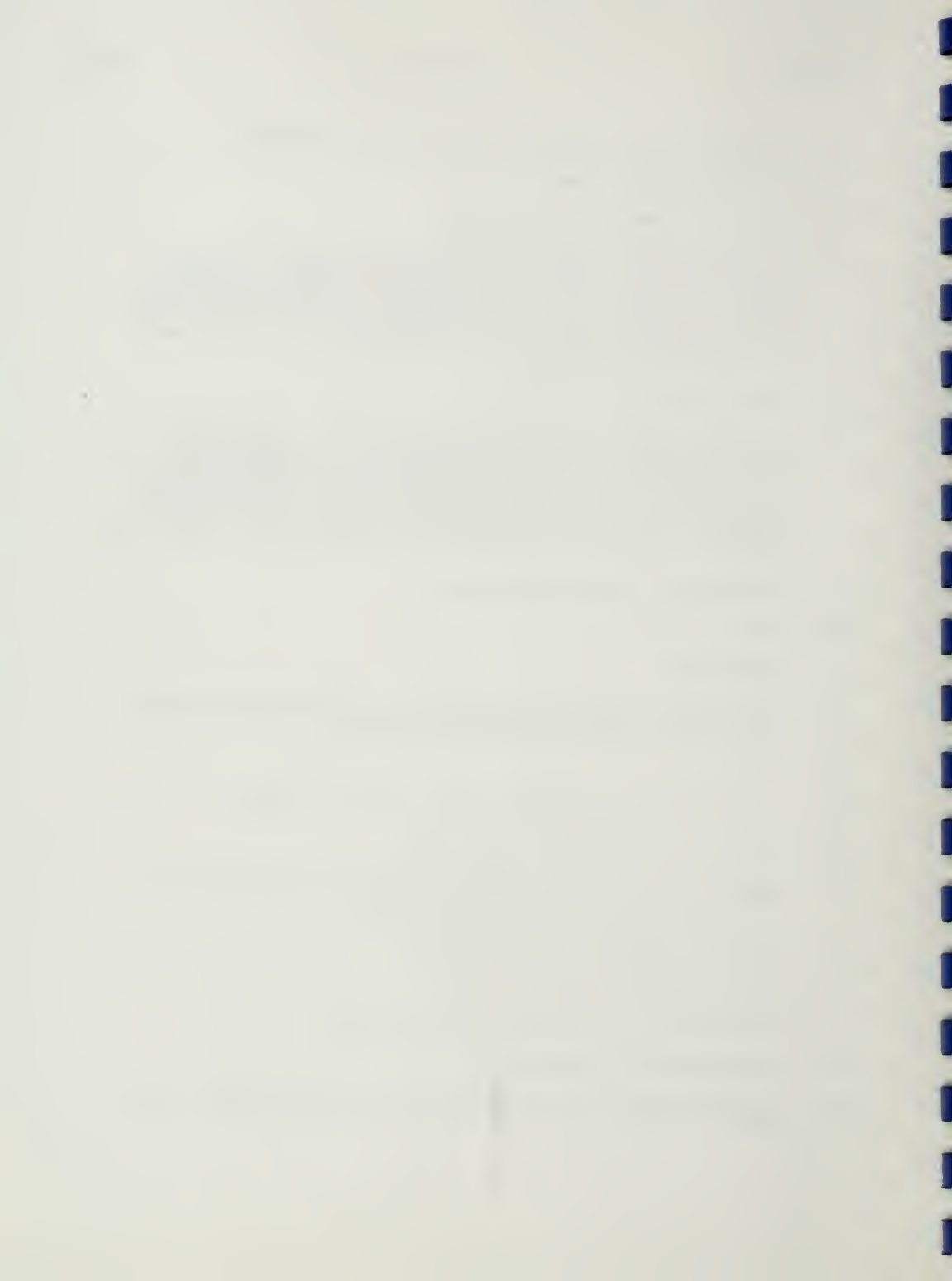
JW: What was the origin of your nickname?

BC: I guess because my name is Bernice.

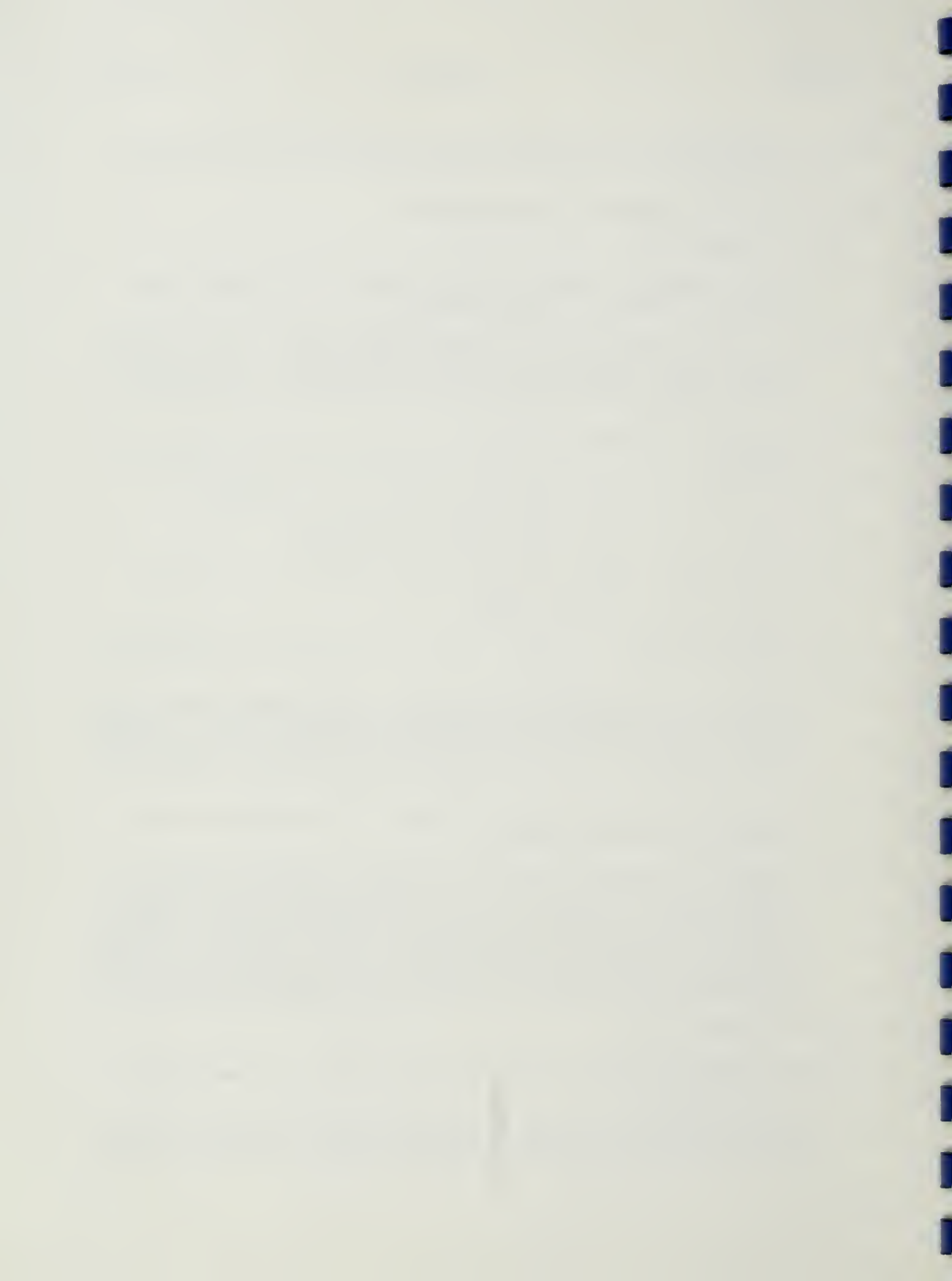
JW: Which parent do you think you were closest to?

BC: Which parent was I closest to?

JW: You know, which one would you go to when you had something to talk about?



- BC: Well, I think it's only natural that a girl goes to her mother, don't you think?
- JW: Most of the girls went to their fathers.
- BC: Oh, really? Oh!
- JW: I don't think it's anything "natural" (one way or the other). It's what you're trained ... raised up with.
- BC: Oh. Well, my mother was such an understanding person. Her son-in-laws even loved her because she was such a ... peacemaker. Because some mother-in-laws, I understand, can be so domineering. But my mother was a very sweet woman.
- JW: What kinds of things would she do to occupy her time when she was not working?
- BC: My mother? The only work that she did was around the house.
- JW: I know ... But I mean, what did she do to have fun?
- BC: She would visit friends with her husband and family. Go to church socials, picnics. Play the piano.
- JW: She didn't belong to the church choir, or the Federated Colored Women's Association? (sic)
- BC: No, no. I guess she didn't have a voice. No, she didn't belong to the church choir. She was just a very quiet, sweet person that ... you know, she was just interested in her children and just a mother that you think of as ... if there is such a thing as angels, you just know that she'd be one of them.
- JW: What kinds of things, when you were small, did you imagine you were going to be when you got grown?
- BC: At one time I thought I'd love to be a concert pianist. I would have liked to have taught school, because I did take a college prep course. I would liked to have become a nurse. You remember I told you that we went to the Fresno County General Hospital? Another friend of mine and I, we went to the Fresno County General Hospital and asked if we could register in nursing school. They smiled at us sweetly and told us that they didn't have any openings. We knew it was because we were black.
- JW: What year was this?
- BC: Well, I was a teenager, so you can figure it out ... you can figure it out for yourself.
- JW: Were you trained then to just accept those things? Did your father go back up there angrily and demand that his daughter be admitted, or what?



BC: You see, in those days, the blacks were so few and so far apart. In order to demand anything, first of all you have to have political power. Just a few scattered people can't make any demands. It's impossible. As soon as the blacks migrated out here to the west, right away the Caucasians could see that we had political power. We could vote. And had to be recognized. So as far as one person walking up and making any demands, well, that wouldn't have made too much difference. They would just say, "Well, we don't have any openings." Now what could he do? They would have told him, "we don't have any openings, Mr. Clark. I'm very sorry." Now what could he have done? ... I guess it made him very bitter. I don't guess that, I know any human being would be bitter.

JW: Did your parents discuss race relations with you very often? ... Did your parents talk about experiences they had had with prejudice? I know in some families it was never discussed and in some families it was.

BC: The last letter I got from my sister, she was telling me about some things I'd forgotten about that I had heard during my childhood days. The reason why my father bought our home at 129 St. Mary's Avenue is because he went to Liberty Street, where they were building some new homes. And my father was fair, as you saw in the pictures. They said, "Yes, you can buy a home here." Then my mother, who was my color, took my older sister to see the place. When the builder saw my mother and my sister, he realized that they were Negroes, and told my father that he couldn't sell the place to him. She told me the reason that he gave was that he would not be able to sell the rest of the buildings and people would move out.

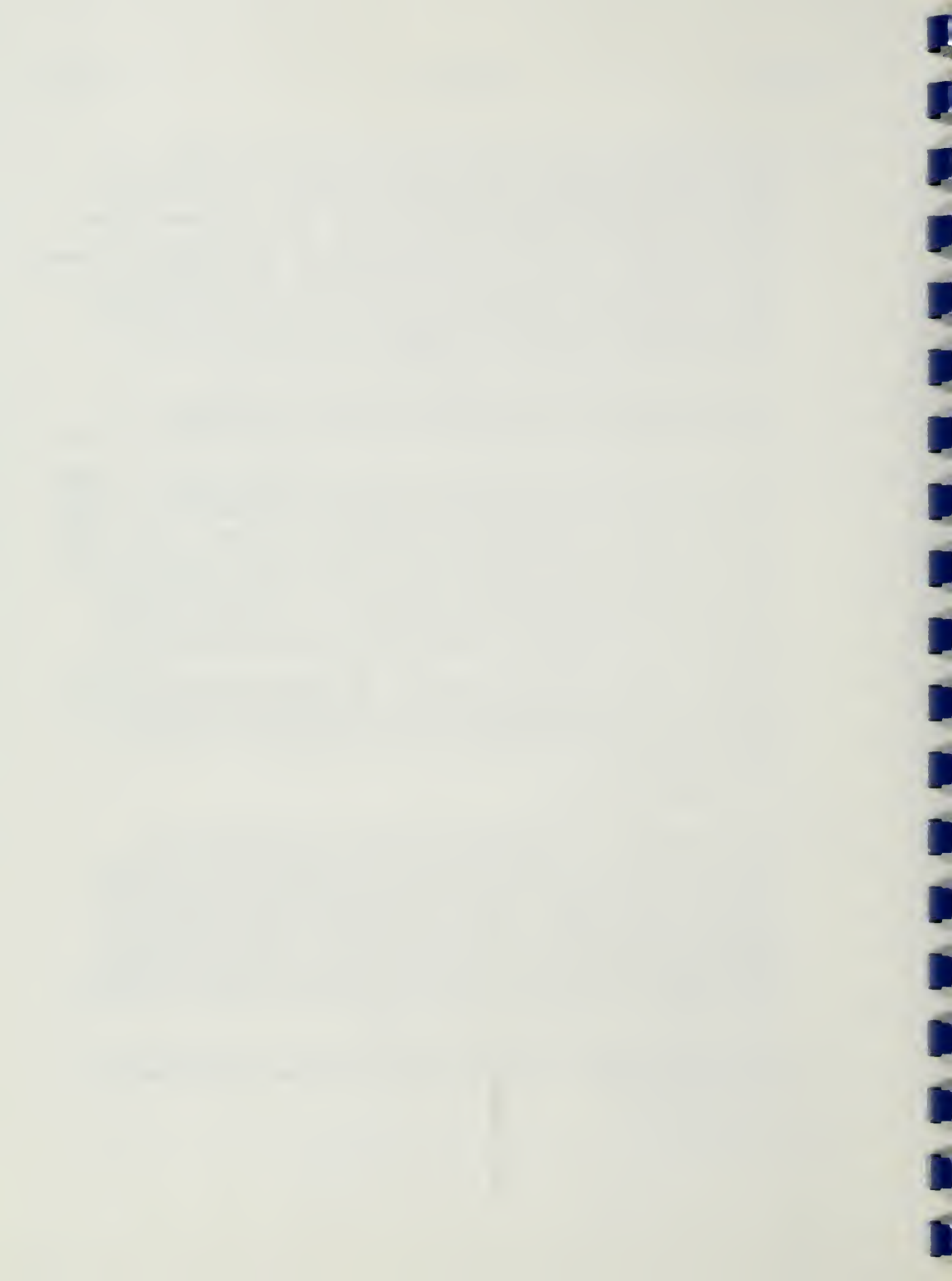
So then my father had to come way out in the Mission, and homes weren't all built up around there at that time. My grandmother would say, "Well, I didn't intend for my daughter to live way out in the boondocks." ... way out in the country ... because there were farms with cows on the hills, dairy farms.

JW: In the Mission District?

BC: Yes. All around. If my big sister was here, she could tell you about it. In fact, she can show you where she used to pick flowers on the hills, and they would pick flowers, because there were no homes out here. And so moving out to 129 St. Mary's Avenue was like moving to the end of the earth. I mean, my grandmother just thought it was terrible for her daughter to move way out in the Mission. Because I think my mother was born up around on Nob Hill ... you know how transportation must have been in those days. It may have been streetcars run by horses. I really don't know. Maybe they had changed to electric cars by then. But transportation was slow.

JW: When you were small, as an elementary school child, if someone wanted to make you really happy, what would they do? What was the thing that you most enjoyed doing?

BC: At what age?



JW: Between six and twelve.

BC: Between six and twelve ... to be taken to a movie.

JW: What kinds of things did you get on your birthday--a new dress, or dolls, or what?

BC: Games like checkers, dominoes, puzzles, new clothing, and I always got books and dolls. I know my mother always believed in buying books as a gift.

JW: Did you ever have books by black writers?

BC: Let's see. My father, he was quite a reader also. What black writers were around in those days?

JW: Dunbar. Chestnutt, DuBois ... James Weldon Johnson.

BC: Some of the elderly ladies would get up and recite Dunbar. I can remember hearing them recite Dunbar. My father had a lot of books by Shakespeare and I can remember reading a lot of Shakespearian stories. And ... in high school, in third-year English, we'd have to translate the Shakespearian stories. I loved that. I enjoy Shakespearian plays.

JW: Are there any particular books that you read that really affected you, and that you remember to this day?

BC: Youngblood (probably Kingsblood Royal) by Sinclair Lewis was one of the first books that I read that ... I can't remember the story right this minute.

JW: Do you remember what it was about?

BC: It had some sort of a racial plot.

JW: I was wondering how ... especially little girls or teenage girls back in those days ... All the heroes of the stories seemed to be boys ... whether girls could even identify ... black girls could identify with literature. I guess they had to imagine they were boys.

BC: Well, you know, there were books like The Girl Scouts, Little Women, Anne of Green Gables, and many, many stories for little girls. I would just live in those stories. My mother would call me and I wouldn't hear her, because I was just living in them, you know. That was my only entertainment a lot of times when I was a youngster.

JW: Were there any plays? Were there stage plays in Fresno, or did you get the chance to go?

BC: They had quite a bit of ... what did they call it ... I can't think of the word ... not minstrel shows ...



JW: Vaudeville?

BC: Vaudeville, yes. That was quite the thing when I was coming along.

JW: Did you go a lot?

BC: I had a married sister in Fresno, and I would go and stay with her whenever I could. That would be one of the main things when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. I'd go and visit her in Fresno, and then I would go (to the theater) with another friend of mine. Do you know Meuhoma (?) King?

JW: No.

BC: She lives in San Francisco. We were great friends. We'd go see movies and vaudeville, or either my sister would take me.

JW: Did they have the minstrel shows?

BC: No.

JW: What about circuses?

BC: What?

JW: Circuses.

BC: Oh, yes.

JW: Movies?

BC: Oh, yes. Well, you'd see a movie and then you'd see a vaudeville show. Movies always preceded the vaudeville. You'd go see a picture. Then after the picture they'd have vaudeville.

JW: Did you have any movie stars that you particularly liked?

BC: Yes, I did. Oh, gosh, let's see, I've forgotten. Who did I like? Well, Mary Pickford was a very good actress. And who else? I haven't thought of that in a long time. Do you remember any of the old stars? Oh, Lionel Barrymore, he was good. And his sister, Ethel.

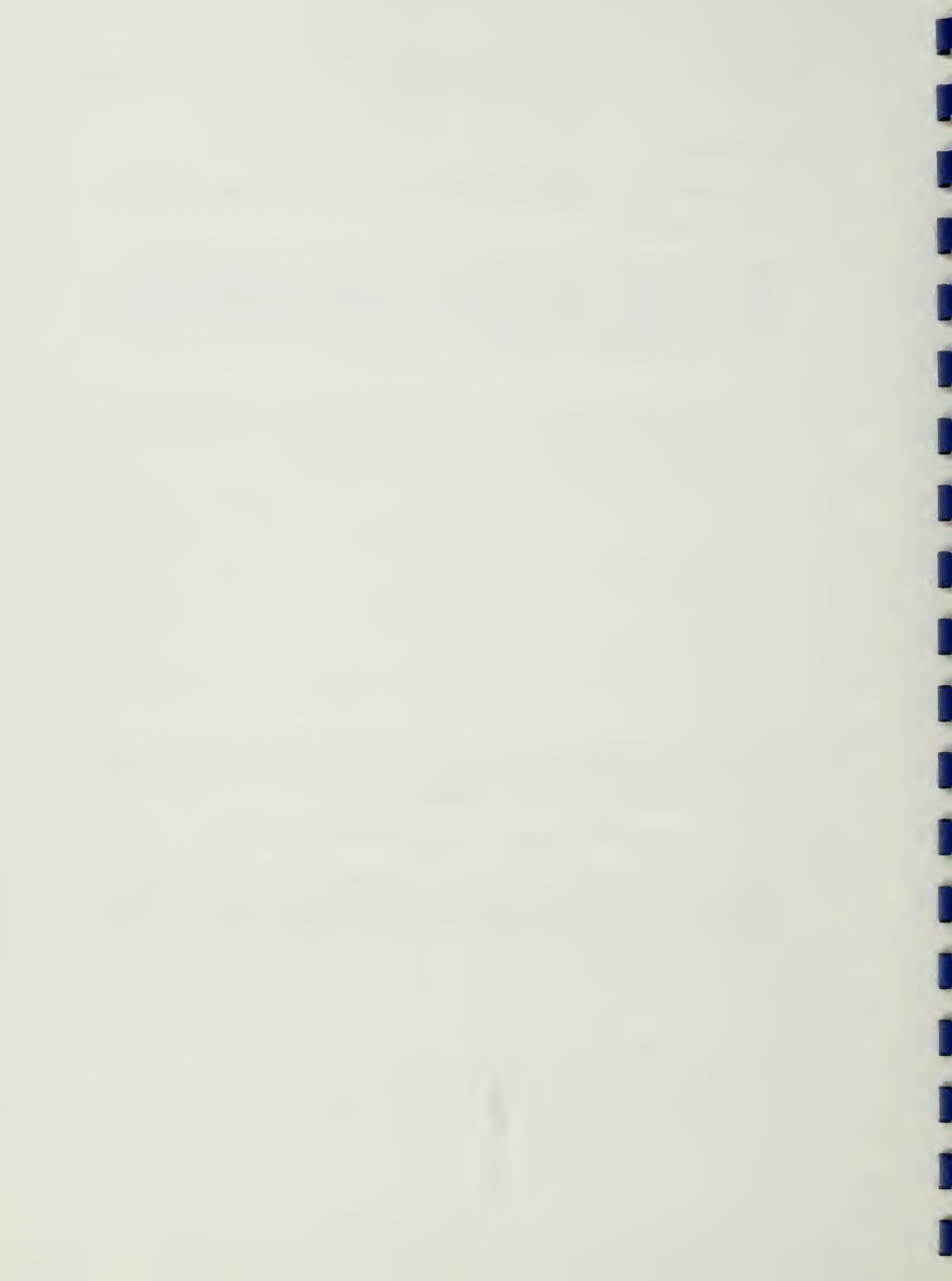
JW: Did you ever think about going on stage yourself?

BC: No.

JW: In school, what were your favorite subjects?

BC: Oh, I guess math and science. I loved biology and chemistry.

JW: Is this what encouraged you to think about nursing?



BC: I really don't know. We just wanted to see what we could do. You know, we were trying to prepare ourselves for the future. So I guess that was just an idea that we had, you know, at the time. This girl friend of mine said, "let's go see if we can take nurses' training."

JW: Did you ever consider moving out of California and going back to one of the Southern Negro colleges and making it that way?

BC: No, I didn't ... because I always felt that maybe they'd hang me from one of the highest trees. Because I was afraid that maybe I might say the wrong thing, you know. Because if somebody called you a nigger in California, you could slap their face. You always heard that you couldn't do that in the South. I was afraid to think of going there, because I was afraid that maybe I'd forget and say something that I shouldn't say, you know. And I was just afraid to go.

My grandson is attending college in Atlanta.

JW: Morehouse?

BC: Morehouse. He was traveling with a friend, you know, about a year ago, from Atlanta to North Carolina. They were traveling by car, and some fellow in a big truck was passing them. I don't know what they did, but my grandson started to talk back to him, and this college kid that was born and raised in North Carolina said, "Don't say anything to him. Those truck drivers out here in the country would just as soon run us off the road and think nothing of it. And nothing would be done about it." He said, "Don't talk back to them like that. It's dangerous."

When I was a young girl, you heard even worse tales than that.

JW: What about things that happened right here in California?

BC: I'm talking about the South. You asked me why I didn't want to go to the South.

JW: Oh. Well, I heard that there were so many Southerners in California that the Klan was bigger here than it was in some parts of the South.

BC: I thought you were better informed about California than that.

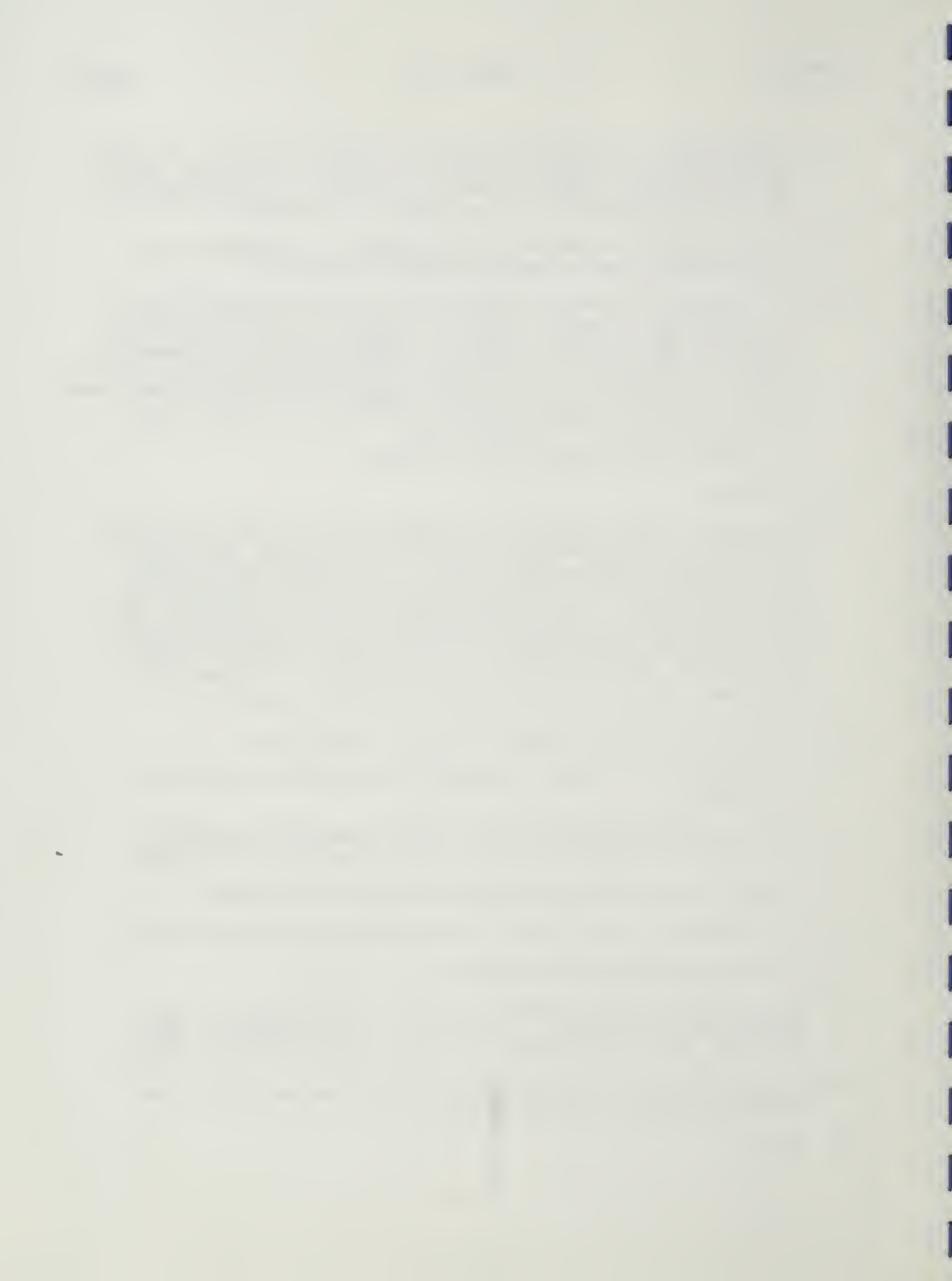
JW: In the Thirties, at least, there were so many people coming out here ...

BC: Oh, are you talking about the Thirties?

JW: Yes. I thought we were talking about (your) teenage years, the late Twenties and early Thirties. I didn't know. I've heard that California was just about as bad as the South in terms of racial attitudes.

BC: No. Could you ... I mean, did you ever hear of anybody being called "nigger" and taking it in the South?

JW: No, no.



BC: Oh, come now, Mr. Warr, please don't say that. Please ... Well, maybe you didn't hear it, but ... You'd even hear them on TV saying "the nigras ..."

JW: Oh, no, I'm saying that they did in the South, but I also heard they did it here too.

BC: Oh, no, no. No. You could slap them and knock them down.

JW: Why would they call you that in the first place?

BC: Well, how would I know? I mean, I don't know ... but they knew not to use it loosely. See, you didn't hear that, because they knew better ... I wasn't bothered by anybody calling me "nigger."

I can remember pulling a girl's hair one time when I was in about the fifth grade, when I was about ten years old. She was an Armenian girl. And I guess I did something to her she didn't like. She called me "nigger" and I pulled her hair and made her cry. She ran to the teacher and told the teacher what I had done. Then I told the teacher she called me a "nigger" and she told this girl, "You shouldn't have called her 'nigger.'" Now this is something new to me that you could be called "nigger" out here. (A noise in the background.) That's my husband working downstairs ... And whoever told you that it was the same out here as it was in the South is not telling the truth.

JW: Several people, but I won't go into that now.

BC: That you had to take "nigger" and that you couldn't do anything about it?

JW: Oh, you could do something about it. But the people here were just as racist as they were in those places.

BC: It was done in a subtle way. But as far as being, you know, if somebody pushed you off the street, you could do something about it. I've heard tales that they could push you off the street (in the South) if they wanted to. One young man was murdered for just whistling at a white girl in the South. Why, I never heard of those things out here. I mean, I think, Mr. Warr ... I don't want to say anything to hurt your feelings ... Let me shut this door. (To reduce noise from downstairs.)

JW: (Apparently a question concerning extracurricular activities)

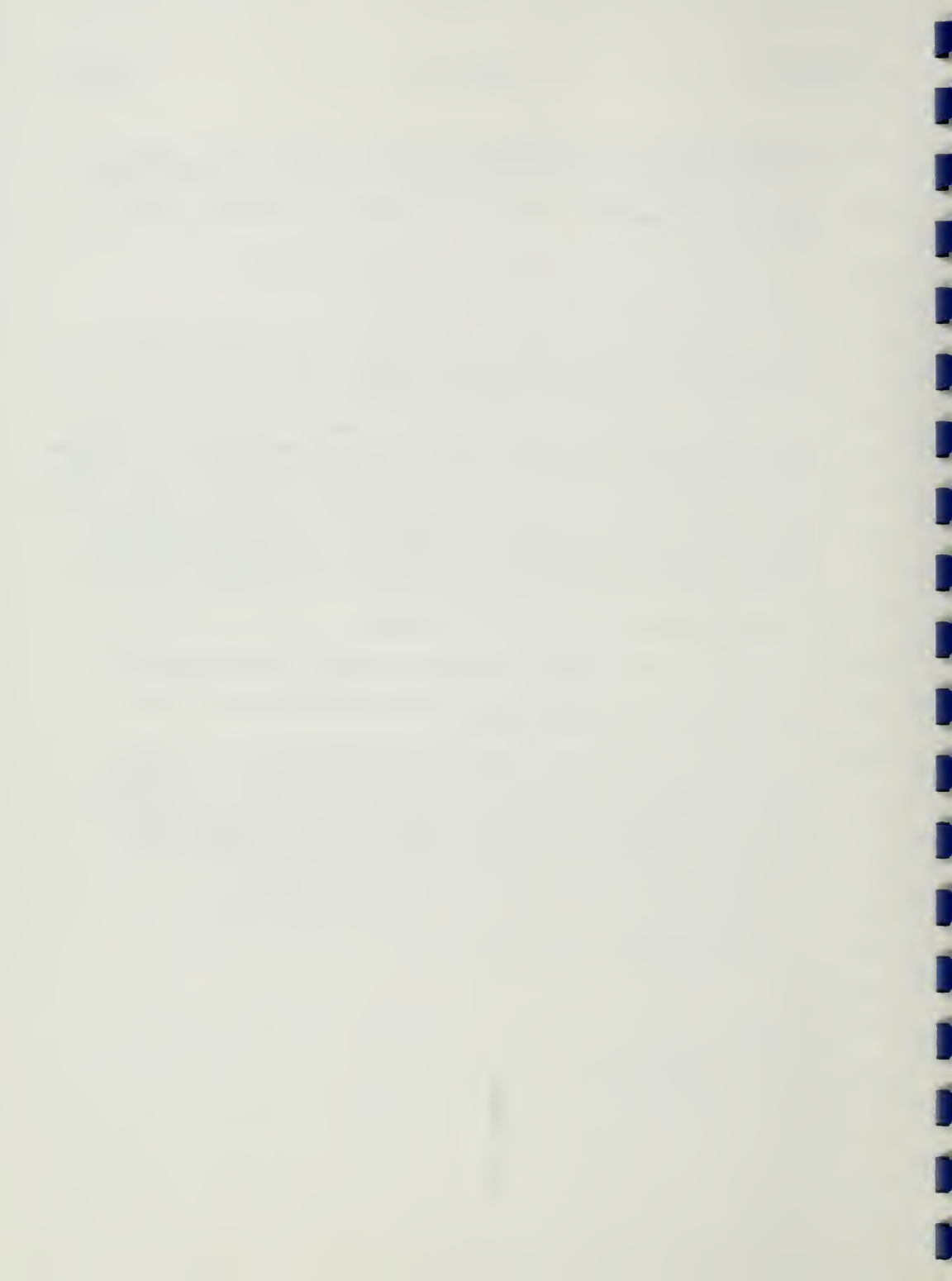
BC: Are you talking about like after school?

JW: Yes.

BC: Tennis.

JW: Were you on the team?

BC: No.



JW: Why not?

BC: I used to swim. Well, I would have to drive my father's car to school. And when you'd get out of school, it would maybe ... you know, traveling ...
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JW: ... Why you weren't able to, why didn't you get involved in team sports?

BC: I played ... I did play baseball, volleyball. I was on the team (tape unintelligible) ... and relay races. You see, I've forgotten all of these things. But I've been on relay races. We'd go to other schools, you know, we'd go by bus.

JW: Were you ever a cheerleader?

BC: No.

JW: What about the "Y"?

BC: No. YMCA?

JW: Yes, or YW, or whatever.

BC: No, they didn't have one. They may have had one in the town of Fresno, but not where I was.

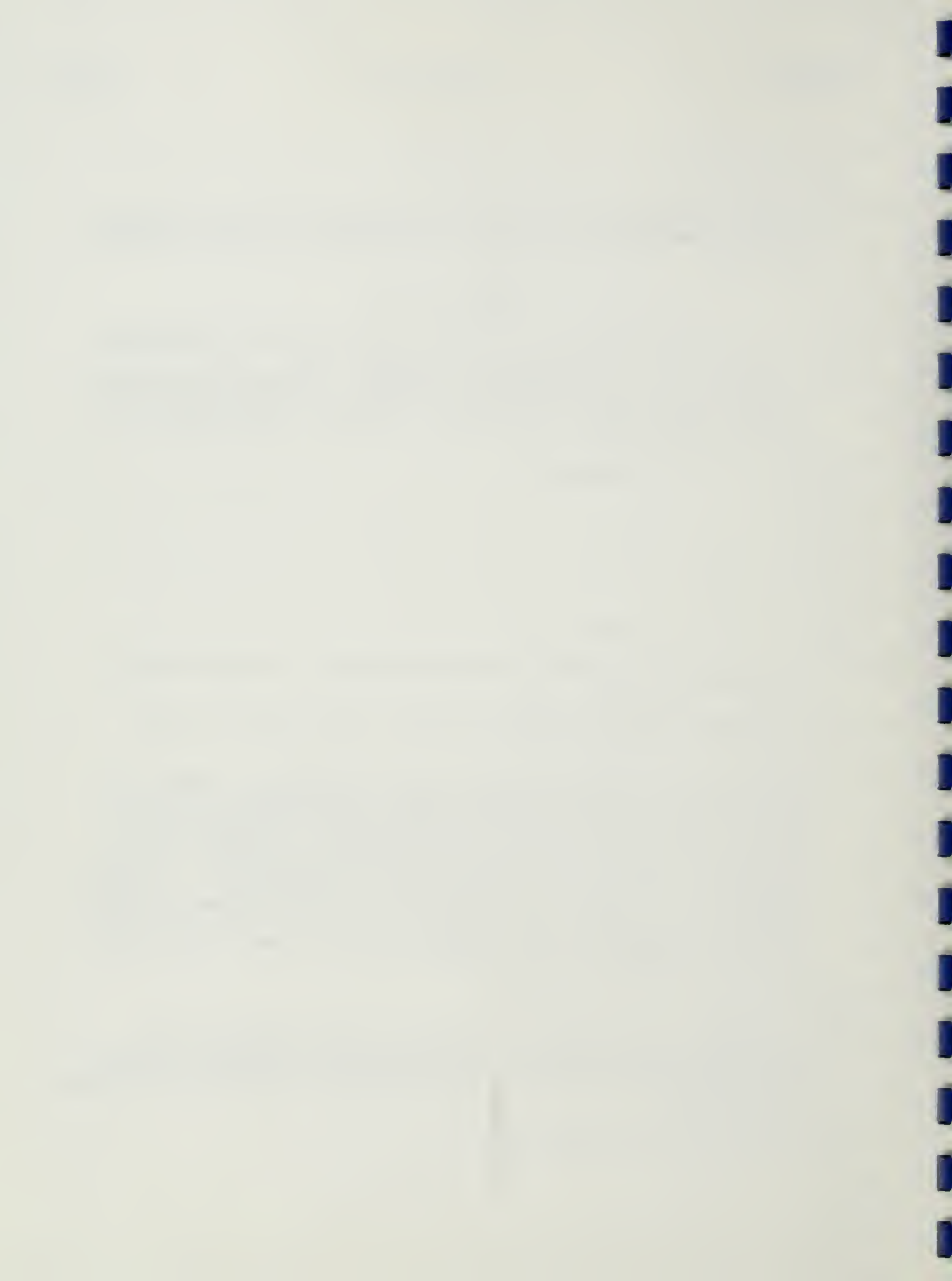
JW: What about dating and that kind of thing in a small town? Was that a problem for Negroes?

BC: We weren't in a little small town. Out in the country one family lives here, and two or three miles down, there's another family. It wasn't just in a little small town, it was farming. You know, farmers ... I wasn't raised in a little town in the first place. I think it would be a lot of fun to have ... I would liked to have been raised in a little town where I could walk around the corner to a friend's house. I wouldn't have been so lonesome. But my husband ... I mean, by the time I got old enough to drive, everybody had their own car. It was a necessity to have a car. My husband came to visit me in his father's car. I had to wait until I was sixteen years old to date.

JW: Where did you meet your husband?

BC: At a Sunday school picnic, by a duck pond. A very beautiful spot. It's still there. In Roding (?) Park in Fresno. Let's see, I had just gotten out of grammar school. I was about thirteen, and he was a sophomore in high school.

JW: And what was your husband's name?



BC: Kenneth Crawford.

JW: And where was he born?

BC: He was born in Madera.

JW: Madera?

BC: Yes, California.

JW: And what ... ? And his parents were from where?

BC: From North Carolina. His father was from Kentucky and his mother was from North Carolina.

JW: What were they doing at the time you met them?

BC: They were ... What were they doing? They were raising a family in another ... in another town, in Hanford. See, we didn't live in the same area.

JW: Oh.

BC: No, he lived miles away from me in another town... Just tell me what some of your questions are, one after the other.

JW: When did you decide to marry?

BC: Keep going. What other questions?

JW: Well, I was going to ask you questions--something about when you ...

BC: Well, we went together for about nine years. Go ahead.

JW: And did you have a big wedding?

BC: Family.

JW: A church wedding?

BC: Family, in the home.

JW: How old were you then? About 21?

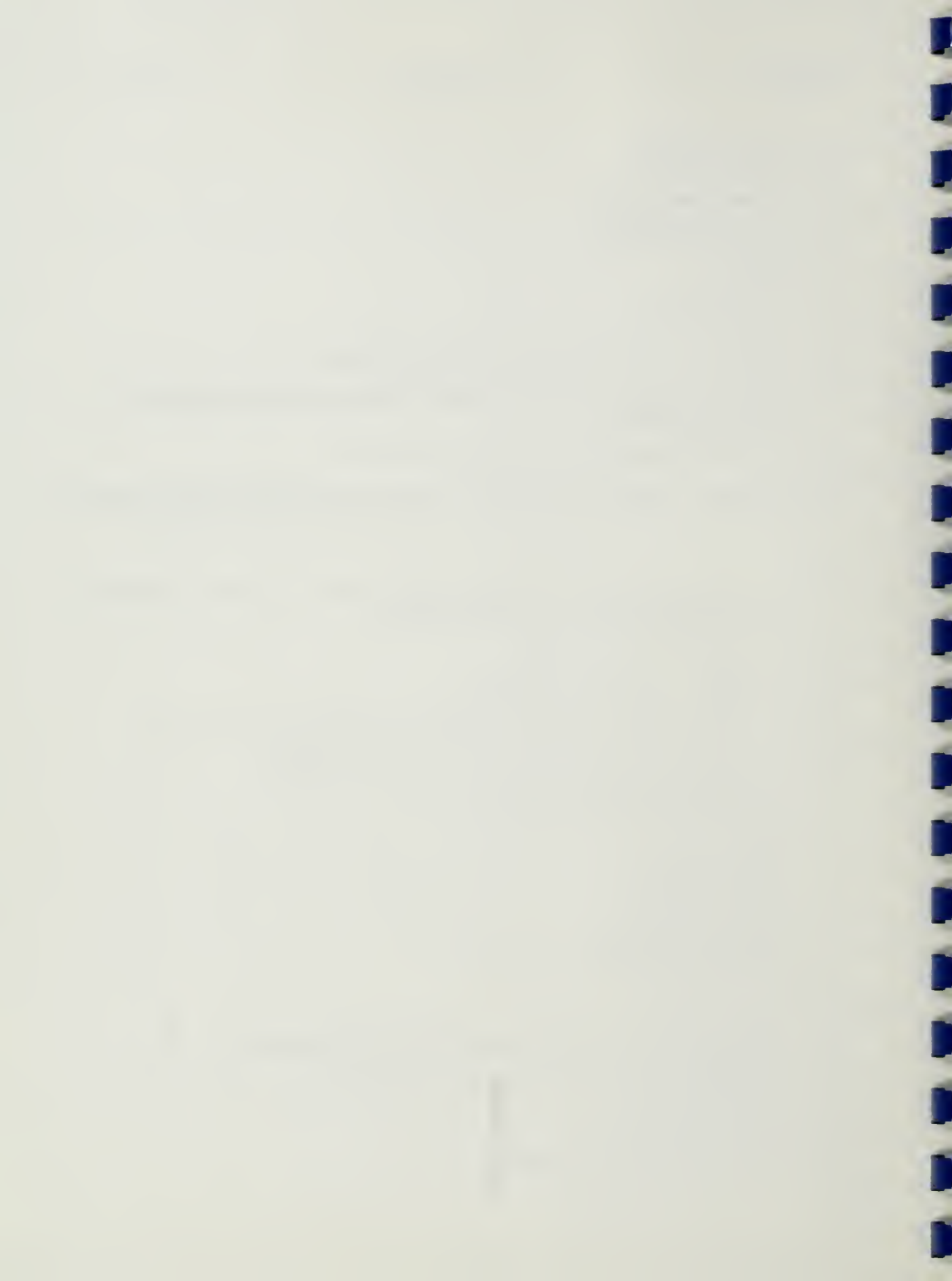
BC: Yes.

JW: And what had you done between high school and marriage?

BC: I'd worked off and on at a tearoom ... Stock girl ...

JW: What is a tearoom?

BC: You've never heard of a tearoom?



JW: Well, I think that they were something different (tape unintelligible).
But other than that ...

BC: It's just a place where people come and have tea and a little food, lunch.

JW: Sort of like a (tape unintelligible).

BC: Yes, they'd have these big old-fashioned homes decorated up into a tearoom,
and people would come there.

JW: Now, do you want to tell me the story about ... You had a major disappointment in terms of someone you used to take math from.

BC: I told you that last time. I thought you were taping it.

JW: No, it wasn't on tape.

BC: You didn't get that?

JW: No.

BC: Oh dear. Is it recording now?

JW: Yes.

BC: When I was taking algebra, there was another black girl and two white girls. We'd do our problems together. And I was always the one that knew how to work out our algebra problems. Then we proceeded to take geometry the next year. And I was always able to help them out with their problems as math came easy for me.

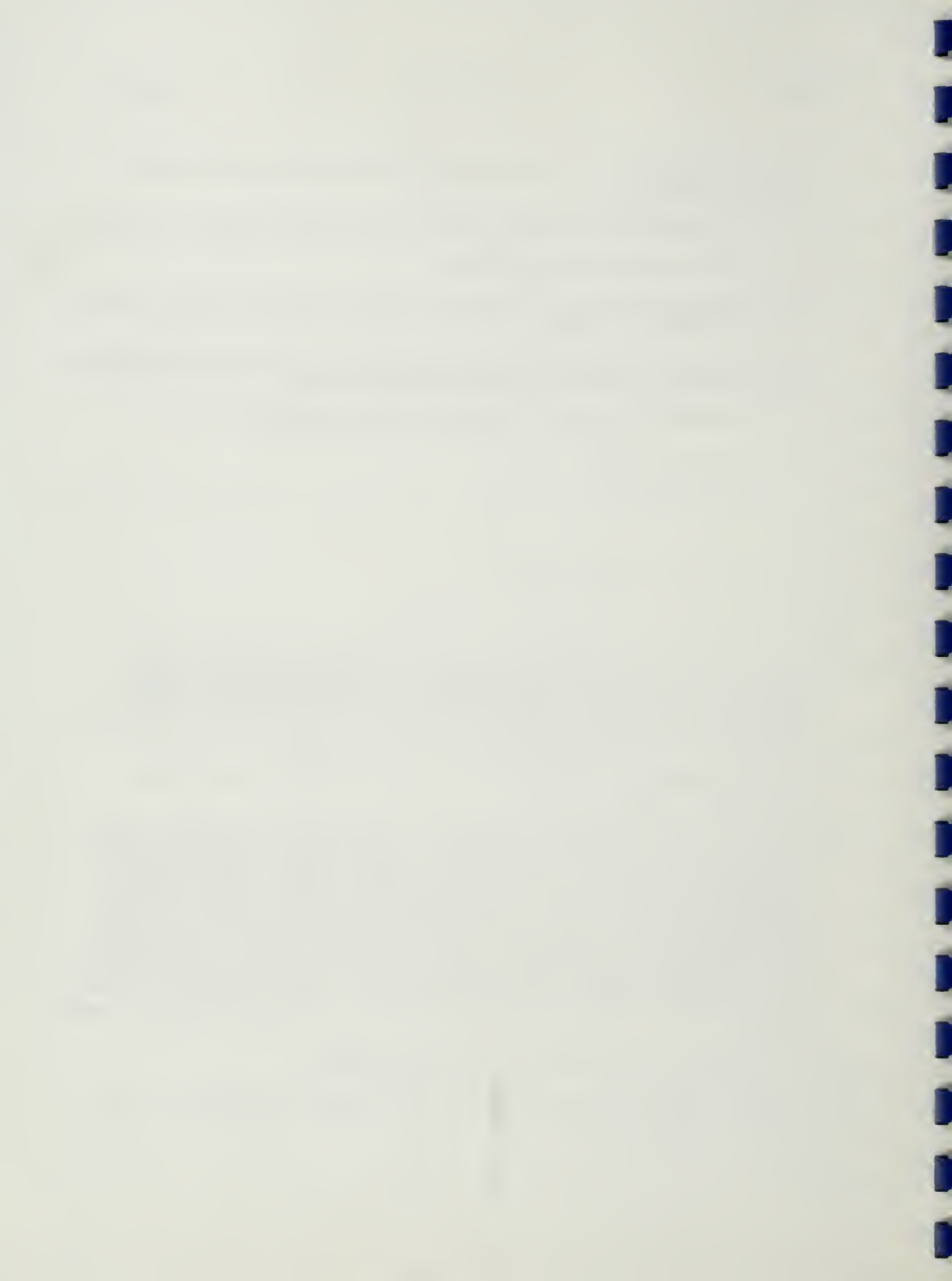
JW: Was this primarily a study group? Or did you all party together and that kind of thing?

BC: Oh, no. No, we didn't party together. Our homes were far apart, but we went to the same high school. You see, they had buses to bring students ... Like if they lived four or five miles from high school, they would get on a bus ... I mean, they had buses to transport them. When they were talking about busing here in San Francisco, you know, some of the whites would be protesting. And I would say, "Well, busing isn't anything new. They've always bused children," because I was bused myself to high school. And if I missed the bus to high school, didn't get out on time, then I'd have to drive my father's car to high school. I have a picture of my bus. ... No, we didn't party together at all. No, no. Only at junior and senior proms.

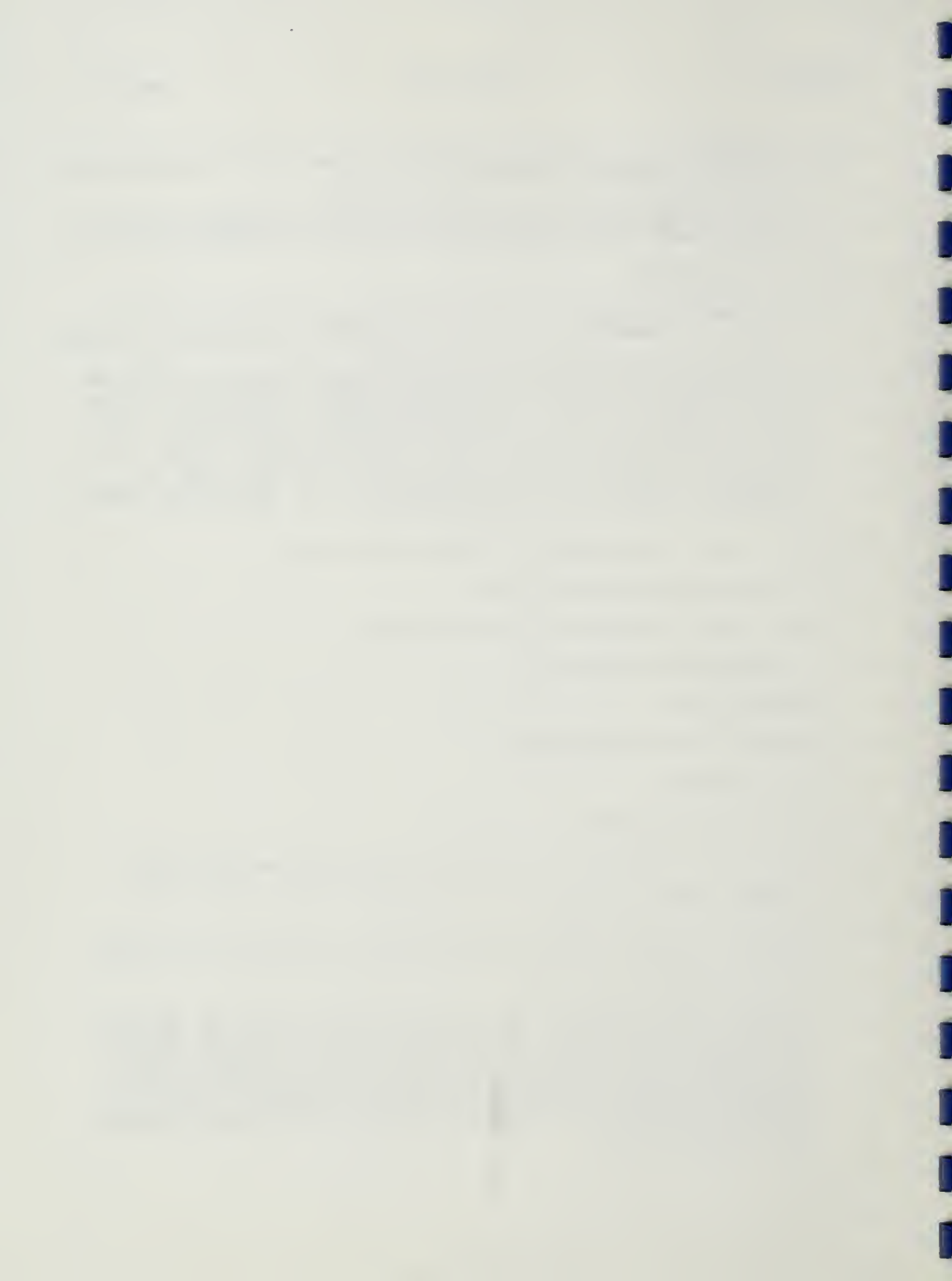
JW: So this was during school hours that you did this?

BC: Oh yes. It was during school hours. Yes, we had study periods in high school. You didn't?

JW: No.



- BC: You didn't? ... But we had study periods. We were given study periods, and we could sit together, you know, and do our work.
- JW: No, (in my high school) you were expected to do your homework or whatever at home. We had seven classes during the day and we went to classes.
- BC: Oh, seven classes.
- JW: Six or seven or whatever. Only the students that were the very "slow" students ... (Husband comes in and is introduced; so the machine is cut off)
- BC: ... We walked into this bank, and one of the girls, the white girls, that wasn't too bright in algebra and geometry, she was working as a teller in the bank. And it was sort of a blow to me, because at that time I knew that they didn't ... weren't hiring black faces ... And a teller's job is such a small thing, you know. That's the part that sort of hurt ... It sounds sort of simple, I mean, telling you this old story. Like my daughter said, "Mother, that isn't anything to tell. My goodness! That's so simple." I said, "Well, it affected me."
- JW: Well, sure it would affect you. (Split-second break.)
- JW: When did you have your first child?
- BC: About almost three years after we were married.
- JW: And what's that child's name?
- BC: Patricia Tull.
- JW: And then you had three others?
- BC: No. One other.
- JW: Oh. And when was that?
- BC: About two ... a little over ... about two years and five months later.
- JW: And this child's name was--?
- BC: Barbara. Her name is Barbara Gilliam right now. She lives in San Diego.
- JW: What does she do for a living?
- BC: She has teaching credentials up to the junior high level. She taught for a while, and then after she had her second child, she stopped teaching in San Diego. Then she was home for a long time, and instead of going back to teaching, she decided she would go into real estate. Now she is an investment broker. In fact, she felt that teaching was a little too confining. And having two children, she wanted to do something where she could have more time.



JW: What does her husband do?

BC: He ... the first Governor Brown, Pat Brown, he appointed him as the municipal judge. Don't ask me how many years ago. Then this Jerry Brown (present governor) appointed him ... gave him the appointment of Superior Court judge a couple of years ago.

JW: And his name is?

BC: Gilliam. Earl Gilliam.

JW: And what is your first daughter ... where is she living?

BC: She lives in Oakland.

JW: Is she married?

BC: Oh, yes. They got married as soon as they graduated from high school. She was seventeen and he was barely eighteen.

JW: What do they do for their income?

BC: He's a police inspector, and she's a social worker. Both of my daughters graduated from San Francisco State University, and also my grandson. He's getting his Master's in music right now. And then she had a business for about five years, an agency. It was a social service agency. And she ... But she didn't manage to get a contract not too long ago. Maybe you may know of that agency. Do you? (No.) The office was down in the Flood Building in San Francisco. She didn't get a contract, due to racism. You know how they can get the blacks out ... even though they are doing a good job.

JW: What's her married name?

BC: Tull.

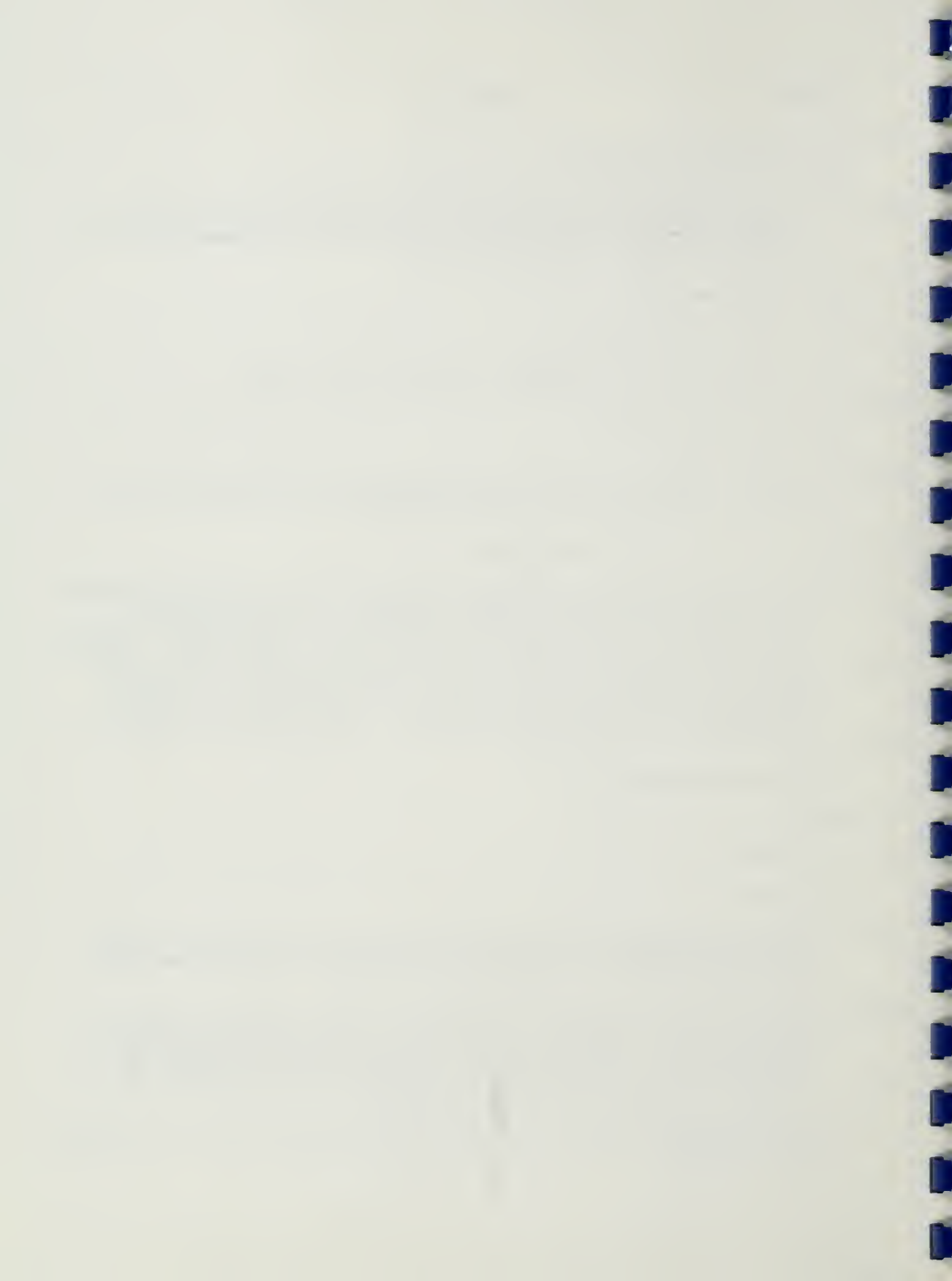
JW: T-u-l-l?

BC: Yes.

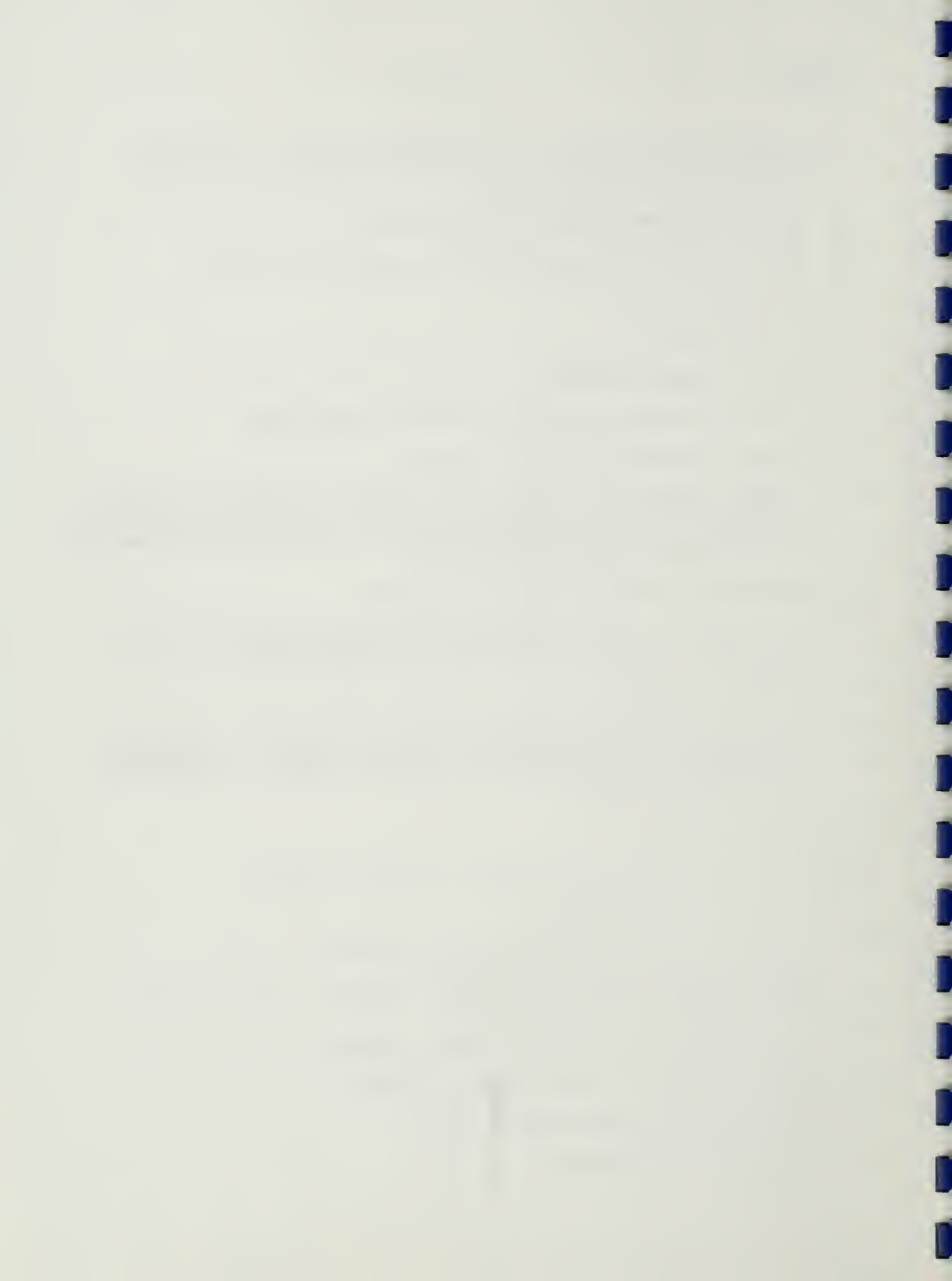
JW: Did you try to make any conscious decisions on how to raise your children when you realized you were going to be a mother? Did you say that there were certain things I definitely want for them?

BC: Yes. I wanted them to get an education. I wanted them to get a degree. That was the most important thing for them to, you know, to really go as far as possible. And when my grandson comes (to visit), I always tell him "Well, after you get your Master's, then you can get your Ph.D." "Oh, Grandma!" (laughs) "You're never satisfied!"

JW: Was there anything that you did differently than your mother did, in raising your children?



- BC: No, no. I can't say that I did anything differently. She was just a good mother, that's all. You know, being a good mother was the most important thing in my whole life.
- JW: Did you ever consider being a career woman?
- BC: Well, I worked for twenty-six and a half years for one firm.
- JW: Oh, where was that?
- BC: In San Francisco.
- JW: And what company was that?
- BC: Robert Kirk Limited. You didn't know that I had worked?
- JW: We hadn't discussed it before. (chuckle)
- BC: (Laughs) My mother didn't work. But I worked. So I guess I did raise my children differently. I guess they had more responsibility, you know, as teenagers. You know, my mother was always at home when I'd get home from school, whereas I wouldn't be at times.
- JW: What kind of job did you have at Robert Kirk?
- BC: Oh, it was ... I was ... I started out as a professional men's tailor. Then I had to take care of the books in that department.
- JW: Are they clothiers?
- BC: Yes. I was sort of ... you wouldn't call it a secretary ... But I had to keep all the books, to know what merchandise came in the department. And I'd have to know where it was. And I had to make out the time sheets and that sort of thing.
- JW: Who trained you?
- BC: On the job training? I had business training in school.
- JW: How did you learn tailoring?
- BC: Oh that. I worked as an apprentice for a tailor.
- JW: Okay. Well, we need to back up then a little bit. When you graduated from high school, what happened then?
- BC: I was in the Valley ... This is in San Francisco.
- JW: Well, that's what I think we missed. We missed ...
- BC: Well, you see, we came up here in '42.
- JW: And you were just graduated?



BC: Oh, no, no, no, no.

JW: You graduated from high school. And then there were four years before you got married.

BC: I guess so, yes.

JW: What happened those four years between high school and the time you got married?

BC: Oh, I worked in the tea shop. And I worked as a stock girl in one of the shops in Fresno. My first Social Security card was in '36, for the dress shop.

JW: And then you moved to the City in '42?

BC: Right. I stayed home, took care of my family, for a long time in San Francisco.

JW: How did you get this job at Robert Kirk?

BC: Oh, I applied for it. I decided I wanted to work, and you know, I applied for it and I got it. I stayed there for twenty-six and a half years.

JW: Did you advance up the ladder as you should? Or did you want to?

BC: Yes, I did, because ... It was all right, because in that department we were making more than the people in the office, because we ... you know, we belonged to the Union. So there was no reason for me to try to, you know, to get into the office, because the department I was in was unionized and my ... we made more than the salesmen in Robert Kirk, because we were in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union.

JW: Were you involved in Union activi ties?

BC: No, no, I wasn't. Oh, I did help the pickets out a couple of times.

JW: Were you on strike?

BC: No ... They were worried about imports coming into this country that would hurt the clothing business.

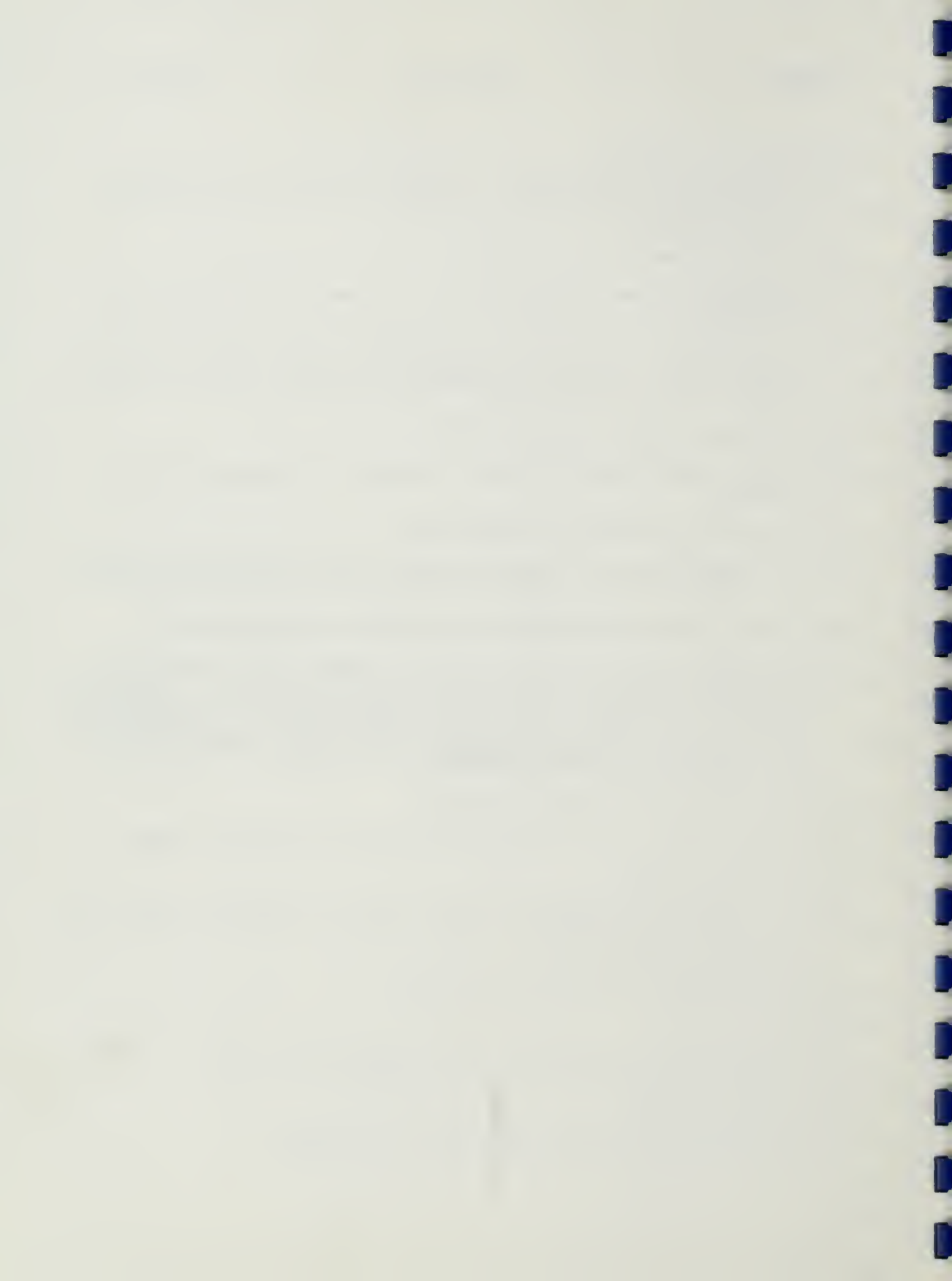
JW: So did you have to picket your own boss?

BC: No.

JW: When you came to San Francisco, it had changed quite a bit?

BC: I beg your pardon?

JW: When you moved back to San Francisco, it had changed.



BC: You say it had changed?

JW: There were now thousands of black people here.

BC: No.

JW: Well, there were these people coming in to work in the shipyards.

BC: Yes.

JW: When were you first aware of the new black population?

BC: I don't remember thinking in those terms. I was concerned about the war and the possibility of my husband being drafted.

JW: What was your impression of the immigrants?

BC: You call them "immigrants"? They're not from another country.

JW: Well, they're immigrants as far as ...

BC: Come now! I never thought of them as immigrants.

JW: Well, "immigrants" means people that are coming in to settle.

BC: I just thought of them as other human beings like myself. I had no thoughts about them.

JW: You didn't feel that they had different kinds of cultural values and behavior? And that their presence was going to make things better or worse for other black people that had been here before?

BC: I don't remember giving anything like that a thought.

JW: Well, what affect do you think they had on San Francisco?

BC: Well, as I said before, you know, it gave the blacks more political power. They had to be recognized. Isn't that right?

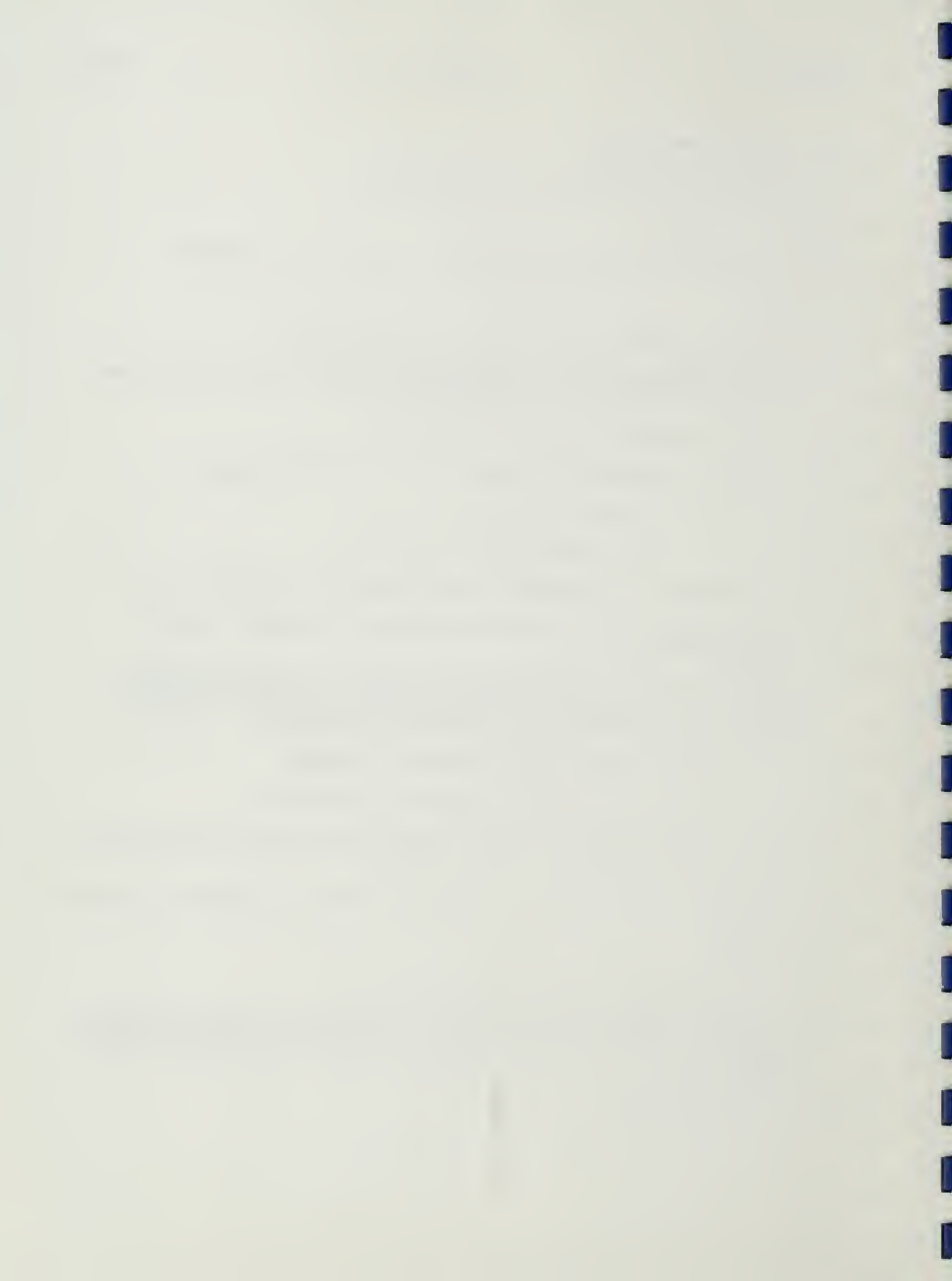
JW: Do you think these people, just by virtue of numbers, contributed to that?

BC: Positively.

JW: To the advancement of black people politically.

BC: Well, having political power means everything, don't you think? For advancement. I still don't think that we have advanced as much as we should. I think there's still racism on jobs, don't you? I think there's still racism.

JW: Yes. But I'm talking ...



BC: And there's so much unemployment. That's why I get so disgusted when I belong to certain organizations and we are supposed to be giving scholarships to youngsters, which (the monetary amount) really isn't enough to talk about, but I feel that it would boost their incentive ... give them a good feeling that an organization is interested, you know, in helping them out just a little bit. And then maybe this organization will contribute to some Caucasian organization like the Diabetic Youth Foundation, where you find only a few blacks. And I say, "Wow, why should we contribute five hundred or six hundred dollars to that organization when they can get money from big foundations ... get thousands of dollars from big foundations like the Ford Foundation and big corporations. Why shouldn't we give it to our youth who are struggling? They're unemployed." Then maybe somebody will say, "Oh, they can get scholarships if they just try." But that doesn't stop me. I will say the same thing over and over again, you know (chuckle), because I'm very persistent. If I believe in something, I believe in it. And I'll bring it up again, you know, on the floor, and maybe ... I know there was one member that would brag that she belonged to another organization that would contribute to the dogs for the blind. You know how that goes--what is that?

JW: Seeing-eye dogs?

BC: Seeing-eye dogs for the blind, which I think is beautiful. You couldn't be human but feel sorry for blind people. But that's another organization that can get just thousands of dollars from big corporations. And here this group ... they are called the Las Amigas Club. Have you ever heard of them in San Francisco?

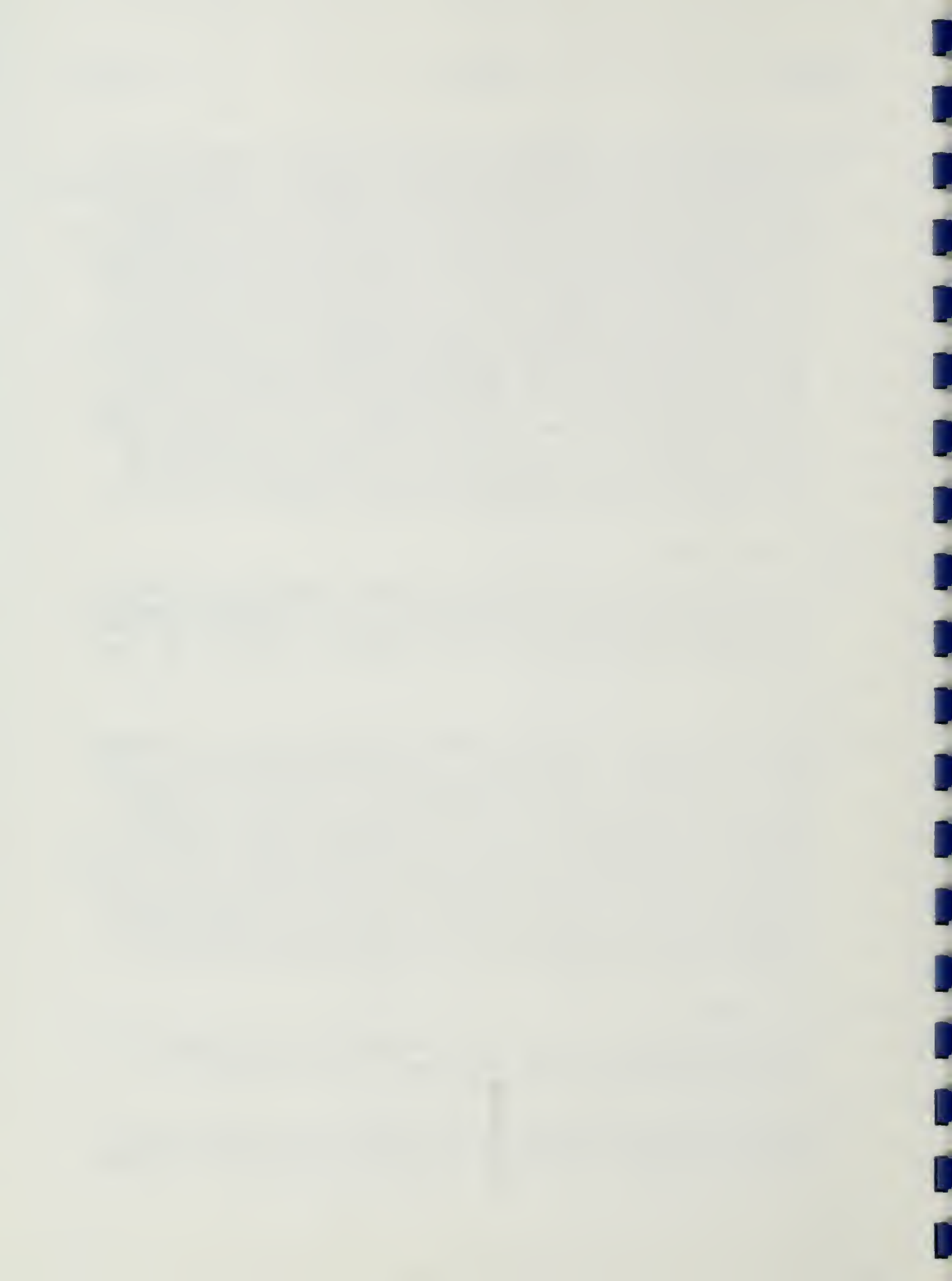
JW: No.

BC: They would contribute maybe two thousand dollars a year to this Seeing-Eye Dogs for the Blind. And I'd say ... and when she'd brag about, I'd say, "Well, my goodness, I would think that you would help some black student out." They can get thousands and thousands ... not just two thousand dollars, but thousands and thousands of dollars from other, you know, big corporations and foundations. And then she'd get insulted. She just thought it was great that here this group of black women, you know, selling tickets and having Mardi Gras balls every year and raising all of this money, and then presenting two thousand dollars to this organization. And--you know that is a lot of money, I mean, most of that two thousand dollars would go into administrative costs than to the recipients. But I still think that would have been nice to have given it to a black student. Don't you think?

JW: Yes, I agree.

How did other people react to the new settlers, the new workers? I've heard them referred to as the "new blacks," the "war workers," the "people from the South," or whatever.

BC: Well, you see, I like people. And I feel that if we're going to try to segregate ourselves, you know, by this or that or the other, how can we make any advancement. You know, I've heard of the "blue vein" societies



in the South. My husband and I think that's the most stupid thing. How do we expect to advance if we are going to divide ourselves. We have to stick together. Otherwise, you know, divided ... we fall.

JW: "United we stand ..."

BC: "United we stand." That's the way I feel.

JW: What church did you join when you returned to San Francisco? Or did you join a church?

BC: No, I took my children to Bethel (A.M.E.) Church. But I didn't join.

JW: Do you consider yourself a religious person?

BC: My parents raised us in the church.

JW: Yeah, but (tape unintelligible). Do you subscribe to the doctrines of the Protestant faith?

BC: Well, I've been a Methodist all my life.

JW: But you're not active in the church?

BC: No, I'm not active right now. I joined the Fellowship Church (of All Peoples.) I like Dr. (Howard) Thurman very much. Have you ever heard him?

JW: I've never heard him speak, but I met his wife (tape unintelligible).

BC: Do you know his daughter?

JW: No.

BC: I thought he was such a wonderful speaker. And he was a little different from the other ministers that would preach this hell-fire sort of thing. But I did like his sermons very much. So I joined there.

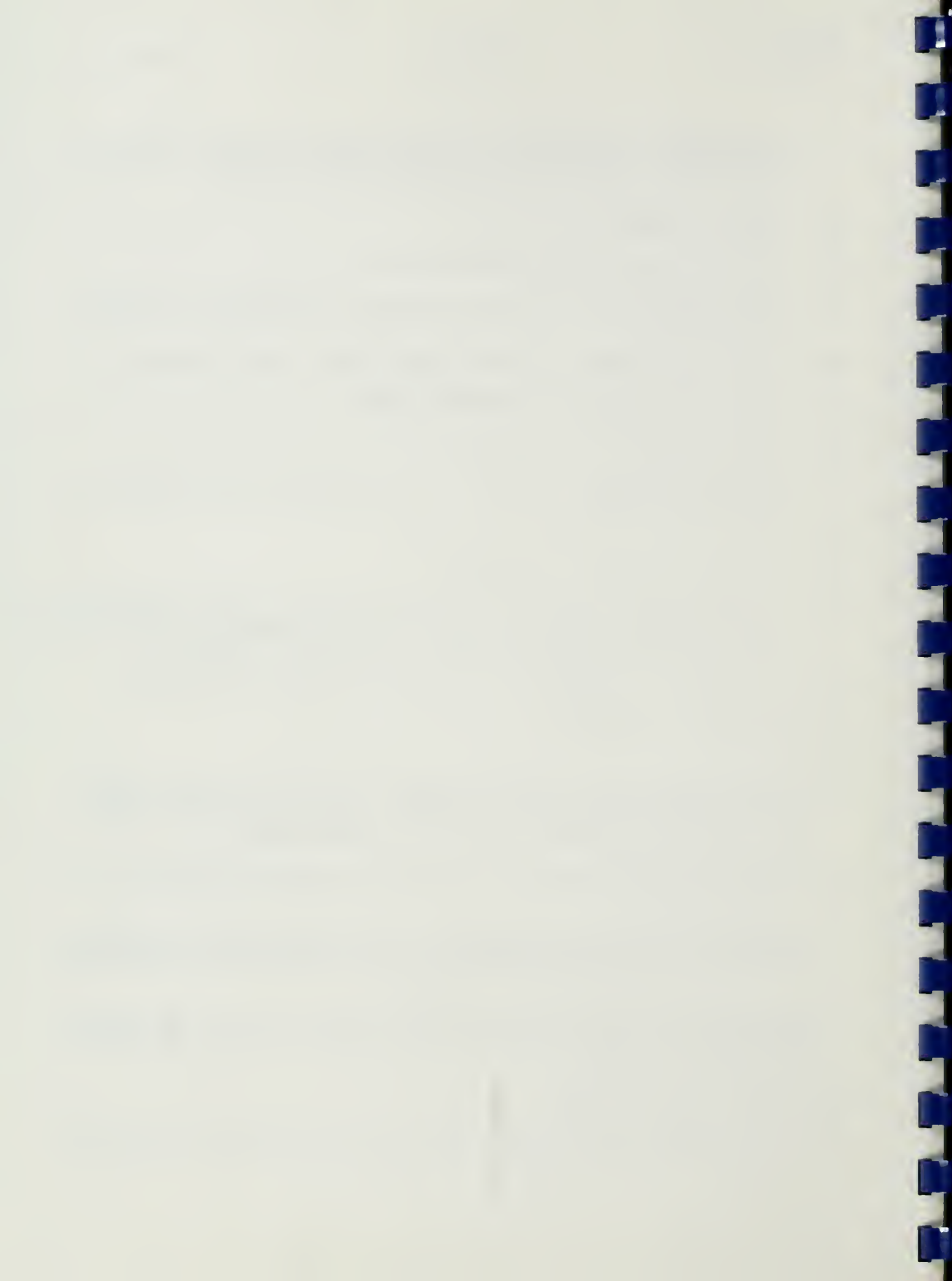
JW: Do you feel that the churches in general make a positive contribution to the black community?

BC: I think they could do more politically. If our people were as interested in politics as they are in churches, I think we would make more advancement. What do you think? You're sort of giggling ...

JW: No, I agree, but you're not here to interview me--I'm here to interview you. (Chuckle) I've said more on this interview than I have on all the others put together (laughs).

BC: (Laughs) Have you really?

JW: Yes. You keep saying, what do I think? I'm here to find out what you think.



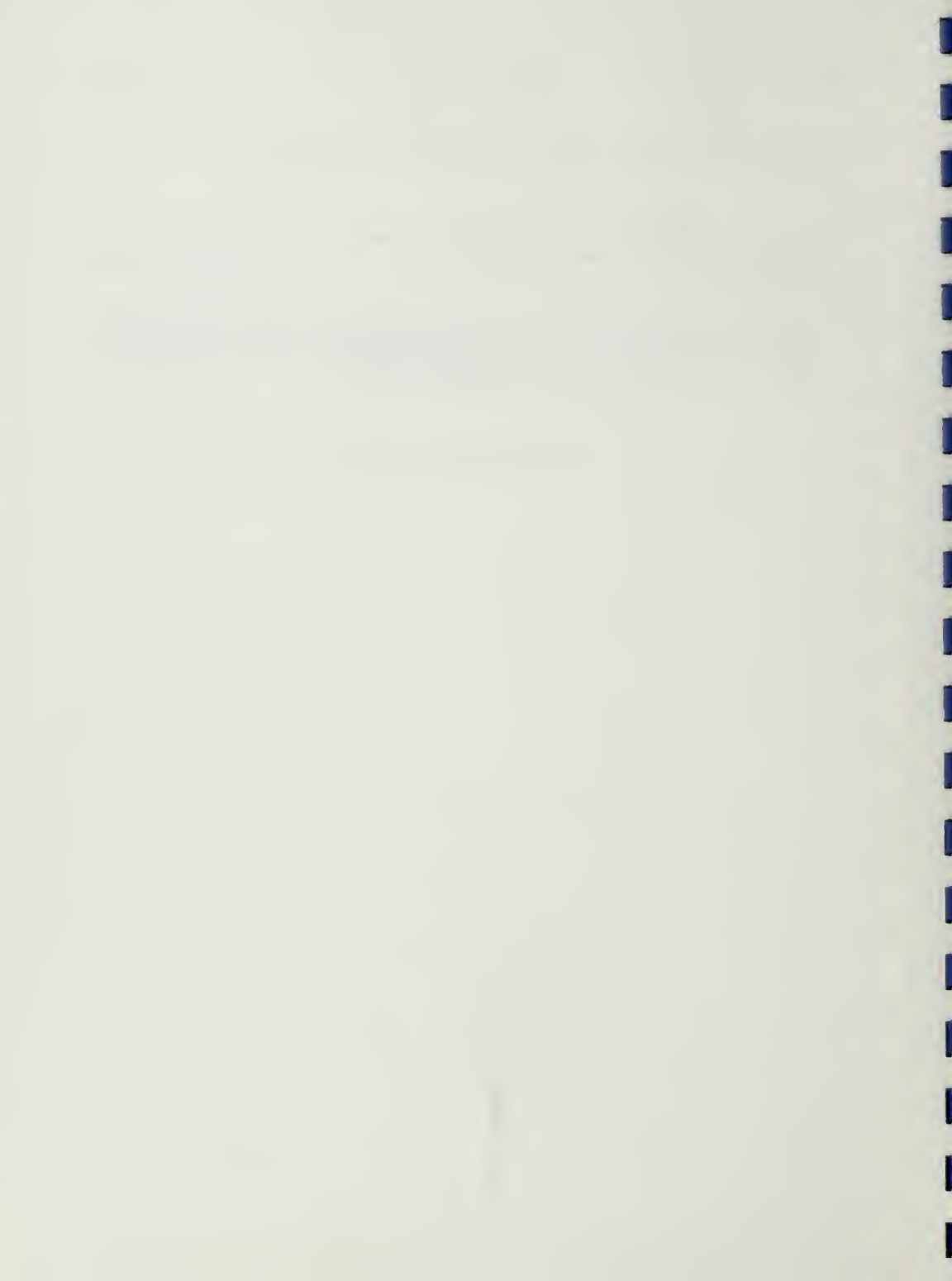
BC: (Chuckle) Well, do you think that's the way it should be?

JW: Oh, yes.

BC: My Lord! Think of the money they spend on these churches ... and the Cadillacs, you know, that the ministers buy. The money should be invested in business.

JW: I wonder how they feel they can save their souls if they don't save their bodies at the same time. You know, housing and good food and nutrition and medical care for their children should be a priority. Their children will learn to save their souls when they are fed and ...

END OF INTERVIEW SESSION



This is Mrs. Bernice Clark Crawford reading from notes regarding her family's early experiences in 19th-century California. It was recorded September 26, 1978, at 343 Vernon Street, San Francisco.

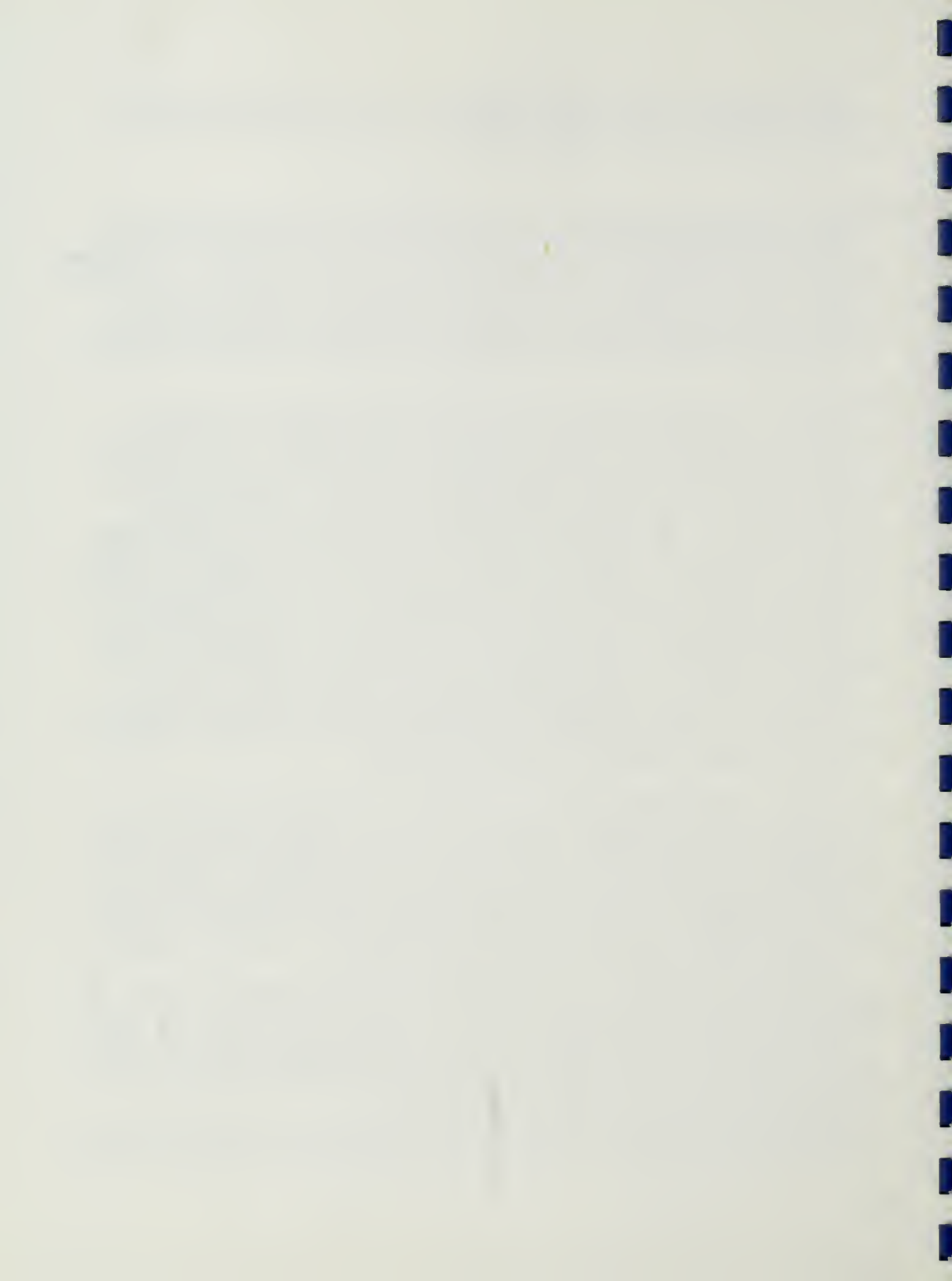
This is my grandfather Barber. John Augustus Barber was born in 1832 on the island of Nantucket, Massachusetts. He came West in 1851, crossing the Plains with two other friends he met in New York. They stayed in Illinois for some time, and got well established in the Masonic Lodge. He carried with him a certificate issued to him in Illinois to start Masonic Lodge work in California. Besides being a miner in California, he opened and established a Masonic chapter. That was the Hannibal Lodge in San Francisco. Oh--I made a mistake. He established Masonic chapters in the gold town ... in ... (she asks that the machine be cut off.)

By trade he was a Master Mason that knew all about blueprints and designs, moldings and cornices for buildings. He hired seven workers, helped build the first brick building in the commercial part of San Francisco, and did masonry work and whatnot. He belonged to the Baptist Church, where he was a Sunday School teacher. He met our grandmother there as a girl. Her folks were the Bells, pillars of the church, and helped build the First Baptist Church on Powell Street. He married Hanna Matilda Bell in 1859, and set up housekeeping with furnishings. Mr. James Bell, grandmother's father, was a merchant taking supplies to the mines. Before the mines closed down, he came back to San Francisco in retirement. He worked for a theater--a main scene changer and so forth. Always wore British tailored clothes and bought the best cuts. Going back to Grandfather Barber, he had a shop to place orders. He was spiritualistically inclined, and believed being in touch with the spirits of those gone. He was prominent in politics. The people wanted him to go to the legislature, but he thought he could do more good leading the civil rights movement. He was ... he was ... oh, he has led the great parades in forcing the Fifteenth Amendment to be passed. He was a delegate to the Democratic State Convention in San Jose, California, representing the Thirty-third Assembly District of San Francisco. He was the first of his race to achieve this honor.

Now this is my Grandmother Barber. I should have rewritten all of this so, you know, I could just read it off. Do I have ... My great-grandfather, James Bell, was born on the island of Madagascar in 1815, according to an old family Bible which my sister has up on Castro Street. As a young man, he traveled to Washington, D.C., where he met and married my great-grandmother, in 1838. Her name was Elizabeth Beckley who was born in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. around 1820. The family also resided in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Great-grandfather Bell was a barber on the fast-sailing clipper ships that traveled to Shanghai. He brought home silverware and china from his travels.

Three children were born to my great-grandparents, two daughters and a son. My grandmother, Hanna Matilda, was born in 1840. My great-grandfather heard of the discovery of gold in California in 1848. He decided to travel west, and landed in San Francisco in 1850, leaving his family behind in Washington, D.C. Later, he sent for his wife and two other children. My great-grandmother, with her two children--with two of her children--sailed around the Horn to San Francisco, bringing much of their silver and china with her.

My grandmother Hanna was a girl of thirteen at that time. She was left behind with friends to finish up her school term at a private school in Washington, D.C.



In 1851, when some very close friends of my great-grandparents, whose names were Johnston, decided to come to California, they agreed to bring my grandmother with them to join her parents in San Francisco. The Johnston family later settled in Sacramento. After arriving in San Francisco in 1850, my great-grandfather became a merchant, selling supplies to the mines. After the mines closed, he worked at a theater as a main scene changer. That's repetitive. I've said that.

I: We can change that.

I: The other girl, my great-grandmother Bell, had been given training in beauty culture. She opened a shop around 1853 in San Francisco, and was forced to close, as her husband felt that San Francisco was too wild at that time for a lady to operate a beauty shop. The Bells were pillars of the First Baptist Church on Powell Street. They were very active in raising money to help build the church.

My grandmother Hanna, being a girl of thirteen when she arrived in San Francisco, was tutored by a Spanish professor that taught her Spanish, She also took piano lessons and was taught tailoring. When she became an adult, she gave private lessons to Chinese people in English.

I believe that's the end.



